Racism Linked to Emotional Eating in African Americans

The Rutgers study also found connections between racism and high levels of anxiety.

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A Rutgers-led study found that systemic racism experienced by African Americans contributes to poorer mental health and emotional eating, which can lead to obesity, diabetes, hypertension and other serious diseases.

Researchers assessed 751 African Americans ages 18 to 88 to determine whether there is a link between systemic racism, chronic everyday stressors, emotional eating, mental health and physical health. Participants were surveyed about their physical health and whether they had experienced symptoms of anxiety as well as instances of institutional, individual and cultural racism. They were also asked about their emotions and whether they led to an urge to eat.

Published in Social Science and Medicine, the findings confirmed that systemic racism in the form of institutional racism, cultural racism and neighborhood disadvantage contributes to stressors that encourage individuals to soothe negative feelings via eating, also known as emotional eating.

“The findings are important as they indicate that systemic racism matters for exposure to stressors and give insight as to how African Americans cope with these stressors,” Lori Hoggard, lead author of the study and assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the Rutgers–New Brunswick School of Arts and Sciences, said in a Rutgers news release. “The study also suggests that racism has direct links to health, specifically mental health.”

Study authors emphasized that they are not criticizing or blaming African Americans who take part in emotional eating as a response to racism or other stressors.

“Fast food outlets and convenience stores are prevalent in disadvantaged neighborhoods, while access to healthy food is limited,” Hoggard said. “Increased access to sweet, salty and fatty foods and inaccessibility of healthy food options increases the likelihood that these foods will be used to cope with salient, short-term psychological distress.”

Individual acts of racism also resulted in high levels of anxiety among Black individuals, according to the findings. Researchers said racism may impact individuals so strongly that racism should be considered a public health concern.

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