Racism-Specific Support From a Partner Can Be Good or Bad for Health

When Black men tell their wives or fiancées about experiencing discrimination, this may help them but could harm the women's health.

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Racial discrimination of any kind can have damaging effects on the overall health of African Americans. Now new findings published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships suggest that the support of one's partner following such stressful episodes can either lessen or worsen health effects associated with discrimination, reports the University of Illinois College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences.

For the study, researchers evaluated the data of 487 African-American heterosexual couples who were either married or engaged. Participants were asked several questions to assess the frequency with which they experienced racism or discrimination, such as how often someone said something derogatory or insulting to them or their partner because of their race.

Scientists then asked individuals about support related to racism, with "helpful support" defined as assistance or advice that made the individuals feel better after discussing racial discrimination with their partners. In addition, participants described their general mental and physical health.

Racism-specific support from wives or fiancées was linked to better mental and physical health for Black husbands as well as the Black women. However, researchers noted that when women faced either high or low levels of racial discrimination, the support they received from their husbands—although helpful—didn't really reduce the stress they felt.

"Black women are there for Black men, but then who is there for Black women?" said Sharde Smith, PhD, an assistant professor in the human development and family studies department at the University of Illinois. "Our findings do not suggest that Black men are not present for Black women, but we are finding these particularly harmful or burdensome effects on Black women in these relationships."

According to Smith, prospective studies should identify resources for Black women to access racism-specific support or ways for Black men to provide the support their partners need.

Smith added that doctors or relationship therapists with African-American patients should be

mindful of the levels and types of support couples give one another, as well as their degree of comfort with discussions about these kinds of experiences.

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