

## The Impacts of Racism on Mental Health

Racism is embedded systemically in physical, social, and cultural spaces that Edmontonians interact with on daily basis. These systems can be understood as legislation, programs, and services. These systems are embedded in the organizational psyche of institutions which have been built upon values that uphold colonialism, capitalism, and supporting the patriarchy. The narratives of these systems are shared and exposed by the media. The system often can create barriers to civic engagement, depending on factors such as a persons or communities' class, race, and gender. How often have you stopped to reflect on the question – “How does racism impact the mental health of all Edmontonians?”

To begin to unravel this question it is important to define Mental Health and Mental Illness. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on how a Social Determinants of Health Framework intersects the inquiry of impacts of racism on mental health. The topic is multilayered and complex, requiring a commitment to sit with the mind and body to understand where this concept is understood in the present moment we are in as a society.

### What is Mental Health?

According to the World Health Organization, *mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the **normal stresses** of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to her or his community.*

- Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders.
- Mental health is an integral part of health; indeed, there is no health without mental health.
- Mental health is determined by a range of socioeconomic, biological, and environmental factors.
- Cost-effective public health and intersectoral strategies and interventions exist to promote, protect, and restore mental health.

### What is Mental Illness?

Canadian Public Health provides a definition, *that states mental illnesses are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour associated with significant distress and impaired functioning.*

Examples of specific mental illnesses include:

- Mood disorders: major depression and bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Anxiety disorders
- Personality disorders
- Eating disorders
- Problem gambling
- Substance dependency

## What are the Social Determinants of Health?

Dr. Denis Rafael shares, that the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) are the social and economic factors that influence people's health. These are apparent in the living and working conditions that people experience every day. The SDH influence health in many positive and negative ways. Extreme differences in income and wealth, for example, have negative health consequences for those who are living in poverty and these effects are magnified when these people are congregated in poor regions. In contrast, those who are well-off and living in well-off regions have better overall health. *Race is recognized as one of the fourteen Social Determinants of Health.*

## Racism in Canada

Canada and Edmonton have a history of systemic racism embedded in legislation, economics, culture, and politics. These historical events have been recorded and shared by numerous historians and the lived experiences of IBPOC (Indigenous, Black & People of Colour) communities and individuals. These instances of historical oppression translate into modern day events and experiences. In systems such as:

**Employment:** Anglicizing names and resumes to get into a Canadian job market.

<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/applying-company-boasts-its-diversity-it-still-pays-whiten-your-resume-study-finds>

**Education:** Pressure points of racism in Education

<https://edmontonsocialplanning.ca/2020/12/07/blog-special-series-contemporary-pressure-points-education-systems/>

There are many more current day examples of this that can be found on the Centre of Race and Cultures website as well.

The experiences of systemic racism will translate into individual relationships as well. This can occur in the form of practices of microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined by the Oxford dictionary as; “a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.”

## The Impact of Experiencing or Witnessing Racism

What happens to the human body when witnessing or experiencing acts of racism? Human bodies are governed by the autonomic nervous system functions to regulate the body's unconscious action. The autonomous nervous system is composed of various divisions:

- The parasympathetic system stimulates the body to “feed and breed, and to rest and digest.”
- The sympathetic system stimulates the bodies “fight or flight response.”

The fight or flight response is the body's acute stress response. It is a physiological reaction that occurs in response to perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival. Too much activation of the fight or flight response can lead to post traumatic stress disorder. When an individual experiences or witness's racism the nervous system is activated, and the body will experience a fight or flight response. Continued experiences of racism lead to a state of imbalance in the

nervous system that can lead to negative mental and overall detrimental health impacts. Here are two Maclean's articles that further explain the impacts of racism on mental health.

<https://www.macleans.ca/society/how-racism-impacts-your-health/>

<https://www.macleans.ca/education/inside-the-mental-health-crisis-at-canadian-universities/>

## **Conclusion**

Thank you, Centre for Race and Culture, for supporting the discussion of this important topic as part of the Challenging Discrimination Through Community Conversations Dialogue project. Session 11: The Impacts of Racism on Mental Health, which was held on December 9, 2020, was a great opportunity to curate a panel of Edmontonians who are advocating and educating the public on this topic.

As part of a movement to increase spaces for BIPOC healing I will be offering a BIPOC healing/wellness circle the last Saturday of each month in 2021 at City and Soul Wellness Collective ([www.cityandsoul.ca](http://www.cityandsoul.ca)).

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