

How Racism Can Impact Mental Health



prepared by Reena Samra and
BIPOC Healing and Wellness
Centre



BIPOC

Healing & Wellness Centre

Racism doesn't only affect people socially or politically, it can deeply affect emotional wellbeing, relationships, identity, and even physical health.

Many racialized people experience stress from navigating stereotypes, discrimination, exclusion, and pressure to constantly prove themselves. Over time, these experiences can accumulate and impact mental health in many ways.

The responses listed below are understandable reactions to living in systems that are often unsafe or inequitable.

@bipochealingcentre

www.bipochealingcentre.ca

1. Emotional & Psychological Impacts

Racism can affect how people feel about themselves and the world around them. Some common emotional experiences include:

- Feeling constantly on edge or anxious about how you might be treated
- Feeling sadness, heaviness, or hopelessness about the future
- Feeling shame or like you are “less than” because of racist messages in society
- Feeling anger or rage, even if you feel pressure to hide it
- Grieving the impacts of racism on yourself, your family, or your community
- Feeling emotionally numb or disconnected as a way to cope
- Feeling afraid to stand out or succeed because it may bring more scrutiny
- Feeling like an imposter, even when you are capable and qualified
- Hearing a harsh inner critic or oppressor voice shaped by stereotypes or racism
- Bracing yourself for discrimination before it even happens

2. Trauma-Related Impacts

Experiences of racism can be traumatic.

For some people, trauma may come from a single incident. For many others, it builds over time through repeated experiences.

This can include:

- Racial trauma after direct racist incidents or attacks
- Complex trauma that builds up from repeated microaggressions
- Stress responses similar to PTSD after discrimination
- Feeling betrayed by institutions that are supposed to protect you
- Trauma showing up in the body (tension, panic, shutdown, exhaustion)
- Being re-triggered in places like schools, workplaces, healthcare systems, or courts

3. Impacts on Thinking & Concentration

Racism can affect how people think about themselves and how much mental energy they have available.

This may look like:

- Doubting yourself even when you are capable
- Struggling with identity or feeling like you don't fully belong anywhere, including feeling like your identity is split or fragmented
- Feeling stuck or frozen when making decisions because of constant scrutiny
- Replaying interactions in your head and wondering "Did that just happen?"
- Feeling mentally exhausted from code-switching or adjusting yourself in different environments
- Difficulty concentrating at school or work due to stress
- Feeling powerless to change unfair systems



4. Physical & Body Impacts

Racism is not only emotional, it can also affect the body.

Chronic stress from discrimination can contribute to:

- Constant stress or feeling like your body is always in “fight or flight”
- Sleep problems or insomnia
- Headaches, stomach issues, or chronic pain
- High blood pressure or heart-related stress
- Inflammation and other stress-related health issues
- Physical symptoms that doctors sometimes struggle to explain

5. Impacts on Relationships & Trust

Racism can shape how safe people feel with others and within institutions.

This may include:

- Difficulty trusting institutions or authority figures
- Feeling like you have to rely only on yourself to stay safe
- Struggles feeling secure in relationships when the world feels unsafe
- Feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in predominantly white spaces
- Families passing down survival strategies to protect younger generations
- Tension within families about assimilation vs staying connected to culture
- Community divisions when resources feel scarce

6. Identity & Development

Racism can affect how people understand themselves and their cultural identity.

This might include:

- Feeling confused or conflicted about racial or cultural identity
- Feeling pressure to fit into dominant (often white) cultural norms
- Losing connection to language or culture because of assimilation pressure
- Feeling pressure not to confirm stereotypes
- Racialized children being treated as older or more responsible than they are
- Hiding parts of yourself to stay safe
- Feeling torn between cultural values and dominant social expectations



7. Behavioural Responses

Many behaviours that develop in response to racism are survival strategies.

These might include:

- Perfectionism as a way to prove your worth
- Working extremely hard to avoid criticism, leading to burnout
- Avoiding opportunities because discrimination is expected
- Withdrawing socially
- Using substances to cope with stress
- People-pleasing in environments where you feel judged
- Staying silent to avoid backlash

8. Workplace & Financial Impacts

Racism in workplaces and economic systems can create additional mental health stress.

Examples include:

- Workplace discrimination leading to burnout
- Pay gaps that create ongoing financial stress
- Being overqualified but underemployed
- Being treated as the “token” diverse person
- Pressure to educate others about racism without compensation
- Feeling professionally isolated

9. Institutional & Systemic Impacts

Racism within institutions can shape access to care, safety, and opportunity.

This may include:

- Difficulty finding culturally responsive mental health care
- Being misdiagnosed, pathologized or misunderstood in healthcare settings
- Being punished or criminalized instead of supported
- Racial disparities in school discipline
- Healthcare providers dismissing or minimizing pain
- Harm caused by institutions that fail to protect communities
- Widespread feelings of frustration or despair within communities

10. Collective & Intergenerational Impacts

The impacts of racism are not only individual, they can affect families and communities across generations.

Examples include:

- Trauma being passed down across generations
- Grief related to migration, displacement, colonization and cultural loss
- Stress from witnessing racism in media or community events
- Burnout within activist or advocacy communities
- Parenting strategies shaped by the need to protect children from racism



REENA SAMRA
(she/her)

Registered Social Worker
Founder & Director
BIPOC Healing and Wellness Centre

BIPOC Healing and Wellness Centre is a culturally-informed private counselling centre in Edmonton that specializes in therapy for BIPOC grief and racial trauma, and is committed to addressing race and culture in the therapy room

LEARN MORE

Produced with the generous support of the
City of Edmonton's Anti-Racism Grant Program and the
Alberta Anti-Racism Grant Program.

Edmonton

Alberta