

In the face of racism, distress depends on one's coping method

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The way people choose to cope with personal experiences of racism influences the distress caused by the encounter, according to a new study of Filipino-American men and women. Published today in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, the study finds that denying or ignoring racial discrimination leads to greater psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, and lowers self-esteem.

"Some coping methods are healthier than others for dealing with everyday racism," said Alvin Alvarez, professor of counseling at San Francisco State University. "We found that when people deny or trivialize racist encounters, they can actually make themselves feel worse, amplifying the distress caused by the incident."

The study focused on 'everyday racism' -- subtle, commonplace forms of discrimination, such as being ignored, ridiculed or treated differently. "These are incidents that may seem innocent and small, but cumulatively they can have a powerful impact on an individual's mental health," Alvarez said. "Trying to ignore these insidious incidents could become taxing and debilitating over time, chipping away at a person's spirit."

Alvarez surveyed 199 Filipino-American adults, both men and women, in the San Francisco Bay Area and found that 99 percent of participants had experienced at least one incident of everyday racism in the last year.

The study found that for men, dealing with racism in an active way, such as reporting incidents to authorities or challenging the perpetrator, was associated with decreased distress and increased self esteem. "It is possible that for men, coming up with a plan to respond to racism fosters a 'you can do it' attitude, a sense of empowerment that buffers against distress and feelings of victimhood," Alvarez said.

Coping by confiding in friends and family was found to increase men's psychological distress and lower their self-esteem. The authors believe this surprising finding suggests that seeking social support may not always be helpful -- particularly if talking about racism implies that the situation is unchangeable or if it causes a person distress by having to relive difficult experiences.

For women, although the study found that ignoring racism results in increased distress, no significant correlation was found between active coping methods or confiding in others and [psychological distress](#).

"What's striking is we found that [racism](#) is still happening to Filipinos," Alvarez said. "Therapists need to look beyond the frequent portrayal of Asian Americans as model minorities and help clients assess what their best coping strategy could be, depending on their resources, what's feasible and who they could turn to for support."

The authors caution that what makes a healthy coping mechanism is influenced by such factors as socioeconomic status, age, English language capacity and length of residency in the U.S.

More information: "Filipino Americans and Racism: A Multiple Mediation Model of Coping" is published in the April 2010 issue of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. In addition to Alvarez, the study was co-authored by Linda Juang, associate professor of psychology at San Francisco State University.

Provided by San Francisco State University

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