

Such a Heavy Load

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Some Stress is Normal

Each time we respond to stress our body produces hormones and activates our neural or neuroendocrine systems. This helps us cope and respond to the stress. Normal fluctuation in these stress hormones is expected and indeed beneficial. A healthy physiological stress response is essential to alerting our minds and bodies to stressful situations, thoughts, and feelings. But over time these same responses can damage our bodies.

Frequent activation of the stress response hormones creates what is referred to as the allostatic load. This is a term used to explain the cumulative damaging consequence of chronic heightened stress response on the body. The allostatic load is a measure of the chemical imbalances in the nervous system, immune system, and particularly the cardiovascular system. A high allostatic load can even lead to changes in brain structure.

Too Much Stress is Harmful

Research has found that people with higher allostatic loads have worse long-term health outcomes than people with lower allostatic loads. Furthermore, people of color have higher allostatic loads, leading to higher incidence of certain diseases like heart disease and breast cancer. A higher allostatic load also leads to poorer maternal health, lower weight babies, and more premature births. The fundamental inequalities in our society make it much harder for some people to be resilient because they are using up a lot of their resiliency resources just making it through each day.

Racism is Stressful

Research has found that when all things are held equal (education, income, diet, etc.) people of color are still more likely to have a higher allostatic load and worse health outcomes as a result than their

white counterparts. Perhaps most troubling is that this pattern holds true even when all things are not equal.

A white woman with little educational attainment and a low income is still more likely to have better health outcomes than a black woman with high educational attainment and a higher income.

Allostatic load helps us understand how race and racism can be bad for the health of people of color. The bottom line is: racism is stressful. What are some of the everyday ways people of color might experience racism? Here are a few:

Driving While Black

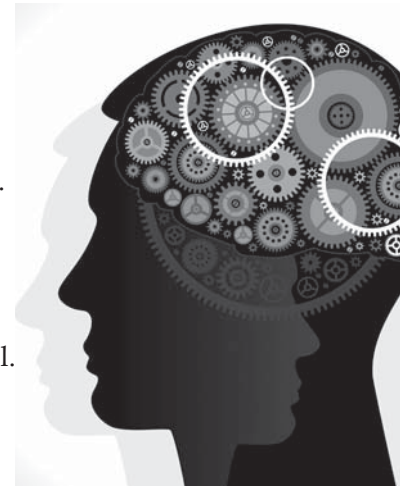
A government report found that blacks and Hispanics were three times as likely to be searched during a traffic stop, blacks were twice as likely to be arrested, and blacks were nearly four times as likely to experience the threat or use of force during interactions with the police.

Racial Wealth Gap

White median household net worth is about \$90,000; in contrast it is only about \$8,000 for the median Latino household and a mere \$6,000 for the median black household. This is true despite the fact that black families save money at a higher rate than white families.

Health Inequalities

Only 68% of Hispanics and 79% of blacks have health insurance while 88% of whites have coverage. Members of racial and ethnic minority populations are more likely than whites to have poor health and to die prematurely.



What Can We Do?

People of color live with more fear of police, less financial cushion, and poorer health than white people. Many social services are aimed at getting resources and opportunities to underserved populations. But these resources may not be able to overcome health disparities and long-term health outcomes for people of color. Seeing the effects of living with the stress of racism, it seems clear that it is not enough to provide services or programs. We also need to explicitly challenge racism, which hurts on many levels, including physically.

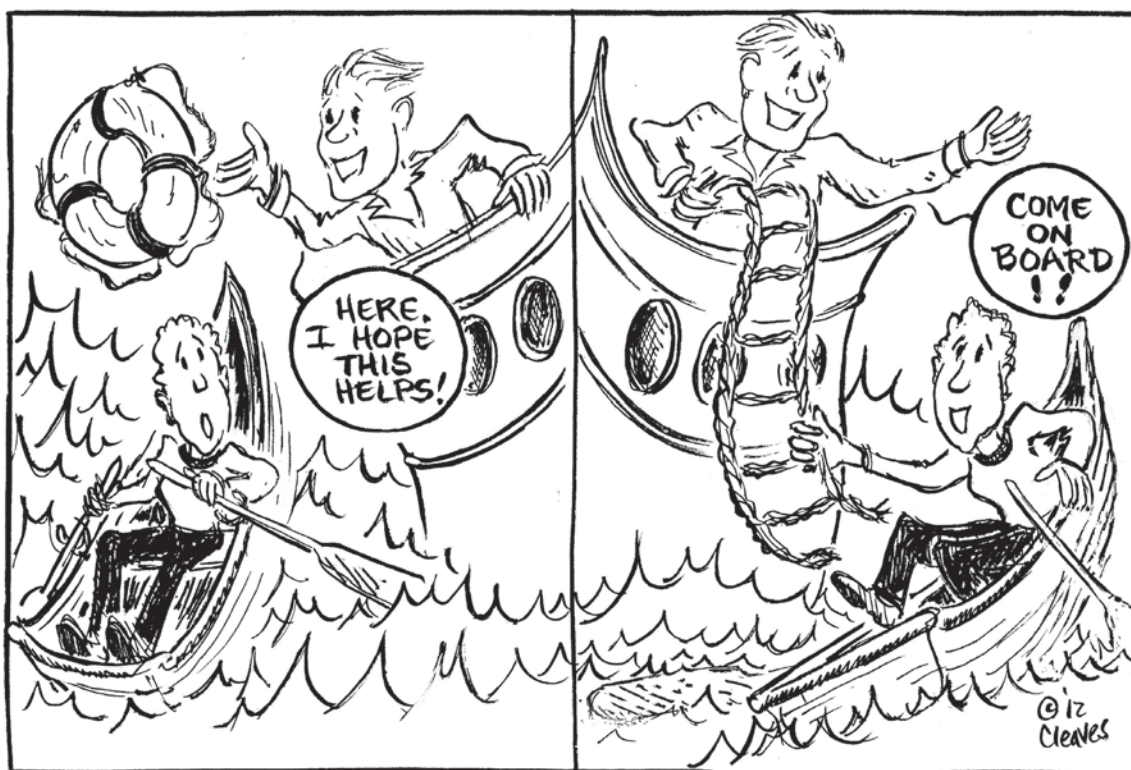
Police should be held accountable for racial profiling. We should address the racial wealth gap with educational and financial supports for families of color. Universal health care would help address health disparities, but we should also pay

attention to the special health needs of communities of color. And there are many other ways we could address racism and other “isms” that cause a higher allostatic load in certain groups.

Humans are resilient. Indeed, our brains are wired to respond to stress in productive ways. But too much stress is bad for your health, and because of problems like racism, sexism, and poverty in society, some people are burdened with a higher allostatic load than others.

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Sources: <www.aclu.org/racial-justice/departments-justice-statistics-show-clear-pattern-racial-profiling>; <prospect.org/article/race-wealth-and-intergenerational-poverty>; <www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/12/disparities_factsheet.html>; <www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dach/chhep/disparities.htm>.



Describe what you see in the illustration. Which strategy is more likely to decrease the chronic stress (or allostatic load) of the person in the small boat?

What is one thing your community does to decrease community members’ stress? And what is one thing your community could do better?