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How Racial Inequality Affects the Pelvic Floor

Taken from Uchenna Ossai, DPT, physical therapist at University of Texas at Austin

Key Ideas

1. Your environment, your education, and your relationships all affect your health
2. Sexuality is an important aspect of your health and wellbeing
3. Facing chronic stress from racism negatively impacts health, including sexual health and contributes to pelvic floor pain

Factors That Determine Your Health

These factors, called “social determinants,” are things that influence opportunities and ultimately health outcomes. For example, where someone lives may limit their opportunity to have access to healthy food and to good healthcare. The downstream effect may be an earlier age of getting sick when compared to others who live in more resource-rich neighborhoods.

Other factors include the products of racism:

1. Cultural stereotypes and bias
2. Institutional unfair policies like ‘redlining’
3. Individual discrimination

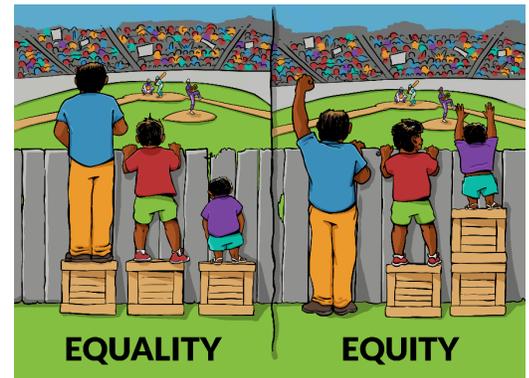
Unfortunately, African-Americans are disproportionately affected by these negative social determinants. While there has been progress made for *equality*, not as much progress for *equity* (see figure).

Impact of Racism on the Brain, Pain, and Sex

Over time, experiencing racism builds stress consciously or unconsciously. The brain is impacted by stress which then *impacts* the body through a biological system called the ‘hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis’. This axis regulates the stress response on the organs, including how the body digests food, fights off infection, regulates mood and emotions, channels energy to do daily activities, and much, much more!

To summarize this in a different way, racism causes dysregulation of whole body function. Ultimately, this will impact what happens in the bedroom and the experience of sexuality. If the body is chronically stressed, the experience of pleasure decreases and can even turn into pain.

Changing the chronic stress experience starts with acknowledging its racist roots and finding trauma-informed providers who listen, all in a safe and empowering environment.



Equality: “everybody getting the same thing”

Equity: “everybody getting what they need in order to improve the quality of their situation”

- [The Interaction Institute for Social Change](#)