

Focusing on the psychological toll of racism

The OHSU Avel Gordly Center for Healing is one of few practices in the Pacific Northwest that focuses on culturally specific and responsive care for the African and African American community. A core philosophical underpinning of the center's work is to remove the stigma associated with mental illness by, in part, acknowledging the devastating effects of racism-fueled trauma on the health and well-being of Black people in America.

"The emotional and psychological impact of racism means acutely, every day, being reminded that you are not enough, being reminded that you are not seen, being reminded that you are not valued, being reminded that you are not a citizen, being reminded that humanity is not something that applies to you," said Alisha Moreland-Capuia, M.D., outgoing executive director of the OHSU center.

Racism is associated with a host of psychological consequences including depression, anxiety and other serious — sometimes debilitating — mental conditions such as post-traumatic stress and substance use disorders. Yet according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, African American adults with mental illness seek treatment at rates far below the national average, in part because of mistrust of the health system.

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people of color combined with the brutal killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, focused nationwide attention on the topic of systemic racism, catalyzing a long overdue national dialogue. Dr. Moreland-Capuia emphasized that not only is this a moment to actively address racism, but also to raise awareness about its persistent toll on mental health and the need for expanded options for treatment.

"While many people are calling this national outpouring a tipping point, we've had many tipping points in the past and little has changed," she said. "Instead, this time a more productive metaphor is a volcanic eruption after a long, slow, steady buildup of outrage. And like the aftermath of an explosion, the time has arrived to objectively analyze the factors leading to the eruption as well as to create new and better ecosystems from the rubble."

For more than a decade, the Avel Gordly Center has been on the leading edge of developing and implementing culturally specific and responsive best practices for African American mental health care. This unique-in-Oregon experience provides a solid foundation for expanding the state's collective understanding of the role of trauma-informed health care to treat the effects of racism.

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"We are at a critical time in race relations in this country," said Monique Jones, M.D., incoming executive director of the center and assistant professor of psychiatry in the OHSU School of Medicine. "OHSU is the only academic health institution in Oregon. We can set the tone and continue to develop best practices for culturally specific and responsive care. But real change requires partnership — not just asking of us, but everyone working together. It's wonderful having allies, but in this moment what African Americans need are partners willing to stand shoulder to shoulder to implement strategies that bring about true transformative change."