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The Negative Effects of Racism Impact Sleep in Adolescents

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Developmental Links Between Ethnic and Racial Discrimination and Sleep

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Sleep-Promoting Programs may Improve Developmental Outcomes and Disrupt the Effects of Racism, Researchers Say

Sleep and sleep disturbances have consequences for the development of adolescents and young adults. In a new article, researchers examine sleep during these periods, focusing on the effects of ethnic and racial discrimination. They conclude that improving sleep may boost health for all youth, but especially for those affected by racism.

The article, by researchers at Fordham University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, appears in *Child Development Perspectives*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

"Discrimination based on ethnicity or race is a form of stress, and stress has been implicated in sleep disturbances," explains Tiffany Yip, professor of psychology at Fordham University and the article's lead author. "Rather than asking young people to 'sleep off' racism, we advocate for creating sleep-promoting programs that have direct benefits for developmental outcomes as well as indirect benefits by disrupting the negative effects of racism."

Parents, teachers, scholars, and educational institutions agree nearly universally that sleep and sleep behaviors are important for the healthy development of young people. Sufficient and good-quality sleep is critical for overall adjustment, developmental milestones, and daily functioning for humans throughout life. Adolescence (ages 12-17) and young adulthood (ages 18-25), which feature significant physical and social changes, are critical periods for sleep health. These are also periods when discrimination is more pronounced.

Although discrimination can be based on many individual and intersecting biases (e.g., gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, education), the authors chose to focus on discrimination rooted in ethnicity and race because of the well-founded documentation of disparities in sleep by race. In their article, they integrate research linking ethnic and racial discrimination to sleep across a variety of methods and developmental time spans.

Characterizing the ways in which discrimination stress is associated with sleep through direct effects, explanatory pathways, or stress amplification matters because identifying the exact nature of these associations can inform policies and practices related to sleep-focused interventions, the authors say. In addition to being a biological need, science suggests that sleep is also a promotive developmental resource. For example, sufficient sleep duration and good quality sleep is associated with emotion regulation, learning, and memory consolidation, all important aspects of child adjustment. Moreover, sleep is also a modifiable health behavior with documented health benefits so improving sleep can disrupt temporal associations between racism and negative effects on development.

The authors highlight various interventions to improve sleep, including school-based sleep hygiene programs, smartphone applications, and cognitive behavioral therapy. Studies show that sleep interventions can improve important components of sleep, such as total sleep duration, sleep quality, and sleep efficiency. Many of these approaches are low in cost.

“Investigations of racism and youth development must consider sleep health,” says Jinjin Yan, a postdoctoral research fellow in psychology at Fordham University, who coauthored the article. “A focus on sleep health also holds promise for mitigating the negative developmental effects of ethnic and racial discrimination on mental health, physical health, and academic outcomes.”

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Summarized from *Child Development Perspectives*, “Developmental Links Between Ethnic and Racial Discrimination and Sleep,” by Yip, T. (Fordham University), Yan, J. (Fordham University), Johnson, S. (Fordham University), Bae, J. (Fordham University), Lorenzo, K. (Fordham University), Ruedas-Garcia, N. (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign), Zhao, Z. (Fordham University). Copyright 2024 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.