**Systemic Racism**

Welcome all, I am Dr. Adeyanju, one of the Child and Adolescent fellows at the University of Iowa. On Byte Sized Brain, we want to explore a number of different topics relating to mental health including culture and race. In the next several episodes, we will begin to explore this topic in “bite-sized” parts. We will talk about culture, identity, how race has resulted in differences in healthcare, and how to talk to kids about race.

First, I just want to talk about systemic racism. It is not an easy topic to talk about, but it is woven into our history. In order to grow and change as a society, we must learn about our history. Race is a word that is used to group people based on their physical traits, primarily in terms of skin color. Ethnicity, while often clumped in together when talking about race, is slightly different. Ethnicity refers more to grouping people based on a shared culture and national origin. For example, an individual may self-identify their ethnicity as Irish or Italian. This is a way people can indicate commonality with others based on a shared origin, language, and customs.

So, we know how society defines race but what does racism mean? Dr. Carmara Jones, a physician and someone who studies how diseases impact populations, has a great definition for racism which she believes is “not an individual character flaw, nor a personal moral failing, nor a psychiatric illness.” She gives a global definition of racism as follows:

“Racism is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on… race that:

* Unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities
* Unfairly advantages other individuals and communities
* Undermines realization of the full potential of the whole society through the waste of human resources.”

Racism is a system where opportunities are based on looks. If you are of the majority race, it will benefit you. If you are of the minority race, you are harmed. In the end, society loses. Potential for new ideas and growth is lost.

The United States of America is known for being a place for dreamers and people wanting a better future, and it has the same problems found across the globe. Slaves were brought to the US in the 1600s when the US was formed. Many of the founding fathers owned slaves. Even after slavery was made illegal in the US in 1865, there were both informal and formal laws that limited the rights of black people through what were called black codes or Jim Crow laws.

For example, there were laws that limited the ability of people to vote, access education, and access safe housing for example. One law stated, “No person of color could become an artisan, mechanic, or shopkeeper unless he obtained a license from the judge of the district court.” A license that could cost $100 or more. This seems like a lot of money now and would have meant more in a time where you could get a meal for 10 cents.

Even now, there are bills being voted on that may limit people from being able to share their voice on issues that may impact them. That is why groups like the American Civil Liberties Union continue to fight for voting rights. Modern ways that votes have been limited include having fewer places for people to cast votes, limiting the time people have to vote, and making IDs required just to mention a few.

Racism is still very much present in modern times which is part of why the Black Lives Matter movement is important. Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Temeti started this movement in 2013. The movement was in part a reaction to the loss of black lives such as Trayvon Martin in February of 2012 and George Floyd in May of 2020. The movement is not about lessening the lives of others but to encourage reflection on the effect of systemic racism and to encourage change.

Even looking at schools, it is possible to see the impact of systemic racism. In schools, there is the stereotype of the “model minority” for Asian Americans which suggests that Asian American students are hardworking and high achieving and that by comparison that other groups of kids such as African Americans don’t work hard enough. Just as in the Jim Crow minstrel shows that showed black people as “slow and lazy” due to lack of effort. However, those beliefs do not take into account that generations of African Americans have been blocked from access to quality education. When “zero tolerance” policies were put into place in the 1990s, black youths were targeted and disciplined more often in schools with suspensions and expulsions. This led to higher dropout rates for black youths, who were removed them from safe places where they could learn, and placed them at greater risk for committing crimes. These are kids that are being blocked from an education and treated like criminals.

Different groups in the US have suffered mistreatment both historically and currently. This includes Native Americans who were stripped of their lands and forced into reservations. Asian Americans who were restricted in employment. Japanese Americans in particular were forced into internment camps during World War II. Currently, there has been a surge of violent acts particularly against Asian Americans just as there was a surge of discrimination and violent acts against Arab Americans following the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center.

Unfortunately, the list of injustice goes on. What is held in common is systemic racism. I am hopeful that the next few episodes will be helpful in starting conversations about culture, race, and identity that may lead to change. I am also hopeful that we can revisit this topic in the future.