

WHAT THE RACIAL ANXIETY IS

Most Americans agree that people of all races and ethnicities deserve equal treatment and respect. Yet constant news reports and personal experiences show us that race and ethnicity continue to affect how people are treated and how they interact with each other. We know that racial prejudice impacts our lives and our communities in a major way. But prejudice alone cannot fully account for all racial dynamics, including cases where people of color may experience differential treatment by whites. We must acknowledge the impact of racial anxiety, i.e. the discomfort people feel in anticipation of or during interracial interactions. The truth is most of us are concerned about how we might be perceived when interacting with others who are different and this can make us feel unsure about how to act. In the context of race, this concern can be particularly acute as people of color worry that they will be the target of racial bias and whites worry that they will be misunderstood or assumed to be racist. This anxiety often grows from lack of experience with other racial groups, cultural stereotypes or distorted perceptions about what other groups are like. Racial anxiety can translate into behaviors that may seem rooted in bias, for example:

- smiling less
- maintaining less eye contact
- using a less friendly verbal tone
- keeping greater physical distance, or even
- avoiding interactions with people of other races all together.

These behaviors can have significant consequences for perpetuating racial inequities – for instance, by leading white teachers to either appear to engage less due to awkward body language or actually engage less with students of color, or white employers to conduct shorter interviews with non-white job applicants, or patients of one race to be less trusting of doctors from another. Moreover, because avoidance and distancing behavior can also be due to racial prejudice, people of another race may interpret these behaviors as stemming from racial prejudice, rather than as a result of anxiety about interacting with other racial groups.

HOW THE RACIAL ANXIETY CAN BE CHANGED

Luckily, racial anxiety can be changed. Extensive psychological research shows that we can reduce racial anxiety when we reach beyond our segregated friendship circles or communities and cultivate meaningful relationships with people of other races. The more we do, the more we can:

- alleviate our anxieties about cross-race interactions
- develop positive attitudes and empathy toward people of other races, and

- gain confidence about navigating cross-race interactions in the future.

Positive experiences with people of other races can also reduce the impact of negative cross-race encounters and make people more resilient when they encounter stressful interactions in the future. Importantly, the benefits of cross-race contact may not occur immediately – a single brief meeting between strangers or distant acquaintances can provoke anxiety, particularly for those with limited prior interracial experience. People tend to grow more comfortable with each other through repeated interactions across racial lines that grow closer over time. Even among people who show high levels of racial bias, physiological signs of stress can decrease through repeated interracial interactions, which in turn can make future interracial experiences more positive. The conditions in which people of different races come into contact matter. Reduced racial anxiety and prejudice occur most often when people of different races cooperate as equals and work toward common goals with institutional support that endorses this kind of equal status and cooperative contact. We can look to cooperative learning strategies and integrated sports teams as examples of how these conditions can facilitate familiarity, mutual respect, and positive changes in interracial attitudes. Yet such optimal conditions cannot always be guaranteed across different contexts. We can use additional strategies such as creating a common sense of identity and increasing the potential for members of different groups to become friends, by establishing norms that promote empathy and interaction between groups and foster respect for group differences. Still, given how segregated our social circles and communities remain; it may be difficult to achieve sustained interracial contact. Racial anxiety is often a by-product of racially homogenous environments, which render cross-race interaction less likely and increase the chances that it will be less positive if it does occur. In these cases, indirect forms of contact – such as observing positive cross-race interactions, or knowing that members of your racial group have friends in other racial groups – can reduce anxiety, create positive shifts in attitudes, and promote more positive expectations for future cross-race interactions. Of course, we must continue to reduce the impact of racial prejudice and bias and address the structural and institutional conditions that perpetuate our country's legacy of racial discrimination. While engaged in these efforts, we must also recognize that addressing our racial anxiety is critical to achieving our long-term goals of removing racialized barriers to opportunity, belonging, and inclusion. We can use intergroup contact strategies to reduce racial anxiety and promote positive interracial relations as an important complement to other anti-discrimination efforts. We can all benefit from moving beyond the confines of our group boundaries into a broader circle of relationships, friendships, and colleagues.

(Linda R. Tropp e Rachel D. Godsil, Racial anxiety can perpetuate racial inequalities, The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues in Sound Science, Sound

Policy, 16 dicembre 2014)