

Black employees more likely to experience depression after workplace mistreatment

August 9 2024



Credit: EZEKIXL AKINNEWU from Pexels

Workplace mistreatment results in higher rates of depression and sleep loss in Black employees than white employees according to research from the Indiana University Kelley School of Business in Bloomington.

While previous research has shown a link between [workplace mistreatment](#) and depression, it has been unclear whether all employees are affected the same way or whether workers from marginalized groups are more susceptible to its negative consequences.

Kelley management professors Erik Gonzalez-Mulé and Ernest H. O'Boyle and former doctoral student Ji Woon Ryu found that Black employees "are more likely to attribute experienced workplace mistreatment to [racial prejudice](#) and make a pessimistic attribution than whites."

Their findings [appear](#) in the article, "Taking a Heavier Toll? Racial Differences in the Effects of Workplace Mistreatment on Depression," in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

"Improving the health and well-being of employees has become an increasingly important concern for organizations," said Ryu, the corresponding author and an assistant professor of management at Portland State University who earned her doctorate from Kelley in 2022. "For example, the monetary cost of some mental health problems, such as depression, can cost organizations billions of dollars via absenteeism and turnover."

According to the World Health Organization, depression affects nearly 280 million people worldwide. For organizations, its economic burden accounts for more than \$190 billion in the United States alone.

The Kelley School researchers based their findings on the results of two studies. The first study involved a large sample of publicly available data. Months after taking an initial survey, a subset of participants in the publicly available study also completed a clinical depression questionnaire, while others completed nightly self-report measures of sleep quality and wore a sleep-monitoring device to measure sleep

quantity. The researchers found that workplace mistreatment was related to depression and sleep quantity, but only for Black employees.

Black employees facing mistreatment were projected to get 100 fewer minutes of sleep per night compared to either [white people](#) —who were or were not experiencing mistreatment —or other Black people not facing mistreatment.

In the second study, the researchers recruited about 500 online participants who were instructed to recall an instance when they felt mistreated by a coworker or a boss.

Black people were more likely to attribute that mistreatment to their race, something that is an enduring, critical aspect of one's identity, which in turn resulted in higher rates of depression. For white employees, mistreatment was less likely to be attributed to race and could more easily be "shaken off," for example, by thinking that the offending person was "just a jerk."

Mistreated Black employees—compared to mistreated white employees—were nearly eight times more likely to perceive prejudice attributed to their race.

"Our findings are not intended to put the onus on Black employees for being too sensitive, but to inform organizations that mistreatment is experienced within the context of one's identity," said Gonzalez-Mulé, Kelley School professor and chair of management and entrepreneurship and the Randall L. Tobias Chair in Leadership.

"Organizations must strive to create an inclusive workplace for their Black employees and should find ways to reduce workplace mistreatment, for example, by implementing accountability measures or encouraging bystander intervention."

In their paper, Ryu, Gonzalez-Mulé and O'Boyle, who is the Dale M. Coleman Chair in Management at Kelley, said that organizations may need to go beyond simply promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging as business goals.

"Many of them have predominantly focused on the diversity aspect, with most attention paid to simply staffing a more diverse workplace," they wrote. "We encourage managers to heed the oft-quoted line, that "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance." Workplace mistreatment is the antithesis of inclusiveness even if consistently applied across racial lines.

"By creating an [organizational culture](#) where respect and collegiality are the norm and members of all racial groups are equally valued, organizations could reduce the likelihood of mistreatment being attributed to an unalterable aspect of one's identity and ultimately mitigate the risk of [depression](#)."

More information: Ji Woon Ryu et al, Taking a heavier toll? Racial differences in the effects of workplace mistreatment on depression., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001170](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001170)

Provided by Indiana University

Citation: Black employees more likely to experience depression after workplace mistreatment (2024, August 9) retrieved 9 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-black-employees-depression-workplace-mistreatment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.