

## WMHD Podcast

[00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

[00:00:13] Hello and welcome to the very first episode of our BeWell podcast series. My name is Bekah Walker and I am a well-being advisor at the University of Aberdeen. Our series will focus on a variety of topical wellbeing issues, which we will explore and discuss with different guests each week. In today's episode, we will be discussing mental health through the lens of race issues. Joining me today, I have Radeen who is Vice President for Communities from Aberdeen University Student Association. We also have Annie, who's a fourth year Business and French student, and also the convener of the BAME Students Forum and Doyin, who is a fourth year Medical student and Vice President of Black Medics Scotland. A huge, warm welcome to you all and thank you so much for joining me. Racism can happen anywhere. It can happen in school, at work, online or outside. Sometimes racist abuse is obvious, verbal abuse or physical violence. But it can also be subtle and can be difficult for people to notice. So how does racism, both conscious and unconscious, affect mental health?

[00:01:17] So, like you said, racism is systemic. So, it just manifests in multiple different ways. And often people do think that it's just overt racism that has the biggest impact. But it can manifest in very different ways. Racism, literally leads to poorer health and it's not just mental, it's physical as well. A lot of us know how much stress can affect your body. If you're very stressed out, you sleep less, you eat less. You can become physically sick. And imagine that racism is stress multiplied, and you feel that stress every single day. And that's the way that it severely affects Black people globally.

[00:02:07] It's not just America, it's very much in the UK, in Scotland. And I think the problem is that people look to look at racism as police brutality in America, the way that black death is all over media and social media. And they don't realise that micro aggressions, for example, can have just as bad an effect on Black people as police brutality can. I'm hoping that by shining light on how micro aggressions affects us and our mental health, it will help people to kind of be more careful of what they say and educate themselves as well, and actively fight racism as allies as well, because obviously the work should not just be on Black people. We need everyone's help just to improve the general mental health of the Black community.

[00:03:04] I very much agree with what Annie said. I feel like racism also has a lot of effects that people probably wouldn't put towards mental health, but anxiety and how vigilant you are is something that you develop over time. Plus, you're always- you end up double checking whether something is racism. And that when double checking, it affects your experience during that period in time. And you then try to start policing yourself so that you don't fall victim towards racism or, you know, it will lead to you laughing off

microaggression when really and truly it is hurting you deep within. For me recently, someone must have made a joke about Black Lives Matter and 'all lives matter', and I know person did not mean that in a malicious way. But if you think with everything that's going on in the world right now, you think it's appropriate to make a joke? And when the person said that joke, I didn't speak up because I thought, I'm not going to ruin everyone else's night. But then I went home feeling guilty afterwards, thinking I really should have said something. And then it just, it sometimes feels like you are carrying the race, even though you don't have to carry the race a long term, long term race. So I know members of my family have told me that they call it a recent experience from a young age, and they did grow up sometimes hating the colour of their skin or hating their hair colour. So in medical terms, it could be classified as body dysmorphia, although that's not the specific definition for it. But when you hide in the skin you are in, it affects how you go through life and how you're gonna lead life. And it just it lowers your self-esteem.

[00:04:44] Yeah, I completely agree with what you've both said. I think being Black is a really important part of our identity and character. And I think part of the importance is because there is a shared struggle and a shared understanding of how the world seemingly operates for Black people in this country. And I think when you're dealing with the burden of, like, microaggression and micro aggressions over years, and then also how Black people are also systemically and disproportionately affected by economic inequality, this increases the risk in Black people developing mental health issues. And I think it's like exacerbated by the fact that we're constantly getting images of Black people in the news cycle being killed, being harmed. And there's just a general outpour of negativity, even though even if you're just living day to day without doing anything, you're civilised. You're constantly being subjected to almost this reminder that, like being Black in this country is not safe. And so that, in effect, is very damaging to mental health overall.

[00:05:59] Yeah. And also, I think, a lot of people might think, oh, we're here to talk about mental health. What, how does racism tie into that? And a lot of people need to realise that mental illness is not the cause. It is the effect. So the cause is racism. So the way that racism affects us institutionally, like medical racism or an education that directly affects how we navigate the world. And like you guys have said, that affects our self-esteem, the way we view each other, the way that the rest of the world views us. So like, even right now, I'm currently writing my dissertation on the Black experience in France. And I'm finding a lot of information about how obviously a lot of us know that race is a social construct. And a lot of White people have this term they use where it's all, you know, we don't have to make everything about race. But when we have Black skin, there is no way for us to navigate the world in any other way than through our skin colour. Because that's the first thing people see when they look at us. It shows that White people often do not think of themselves as White. They'll go by, "oh, I'm shy", "I'm friendly". But the first thing we think of is I'm a Black person. I'm a Black woman or a Black man because that's how we perceive. That's how we're perceived and how we navigate the world. So I think it's important that people realise that racism doesn't

just affect us, like in the way that we might go to prison for this, we might get kicked out of school for this, but everything affects our mental health, because it's just the very way that we exist is seen and perceived as other in the world.

[00:07:54] Just following on from Annie. I completely agree if and you become aware of your race at a very young age. So I know the first time I realised that I was a different colour to everyone else. I must have been about five years old and it was because racial slurs were being said to me from other students at that same primary school. And I've got loads of nieces and nephews now, and I don't want them growing up in a world thinking about my skin colour is this, which means I can't do this. That is the world that a lot of us have grown up in. And it's the life we live in now that you think I can't become CEO of this or can't become this consultant because I'm Black and it's going to take more work for me to do, it's just hard. There's no point in me doing it.

[00:08:36] Do you think that maybe there is like a lack of Black people in power, for example, kind of how you've just talked about? Do you think that affects mental health? And, you know, the way you maybe see yourself and future jobs, and the roles that you might have?

[00:08:52] So I would say like, yes, of course, because the whole time I've been at Aberdeen University, I've only seen one Black lecturer my whole time here. And initially I left a year thinking, oh, maybe it's because that is what is represented in the hospital. But I found that statistics wise, 50 percent of the employees in the hospital are from ethnic minorities. I don't know how many specifically are Black, but even being on the ward, I see multiple Black doctors and I'm like, why are we not utilising this? Because it just it creates that limitation, that ceiling of what you can achieve in life. During my second or third year of uni, we have to go to a primary school and we have to go speak to the students there. So the way my group did it was we had one medical student with about three or four students from the primary school. And on my table, there was this one Black girl out there. And during the question and answer session, she asked me so are you a doctor? And I said, Oh, well, I'm studying to become one. And you could see that light bulb switch in her mind, like, oh, this is like a career option for me. And that from that day, like, I was so happy when I left that I was able to influence someone and show them you can achieve this. And this is why we established Black Medics Scotland as well, because we want to be a mentor student and show them that you do have this option. You do have all these career options. It's not just doctors, it's not just dentists or physician associate. There's so much you can do in life. But if you do look at society, even the Black celebrities that we do have now, the repercussion that they get for certain stuff that they do is so disproportional to what other White celebrities would get. Like a recent example is if you look at Diversity's dance on Britain's Got Talent so impactful and such a great message behind it. But they've got ten thousand complaints because people did not like the political issues that were being raised. And as a young child, if I was a young child

watching that, I would be like, well, if this is what I want to do in the future, what's the point? These celebrities are getting complaints. Who's gonna to listen to me anyway?

[00:10:50] Yeah, I also did not have a single Black teacher actually growing up. Once I moved here cause I moved to the UK when I was nine. So before that I was in Cameroon and it was very much I was unaware of my race because obviously everyone looked like me. And then I came here and I just did not see anyone that had the same colour of skin as me. I didn't see anyone in power that looked like me. And recently, in my French department. No, in my business department, sorry, we had a Black tutor for one of our business seminars and myself and one of the girls on the committee as well, Hannah, we are the only two Black students in the entire business course. We're not sure if the entire year, but we believe so. And the tutor was a Nigerian woman, and we remember the looks that were exchanged in class when she would speak because she had a thicker accent. And as the two class reps, people came up to us and said, oh, we don't know how to put this. We just can't really understand her. We don't know. She just doesn't know what she's talking about. And. I remember just how angry we were because even now seeing someone in some form of power, so having like a Black tutor, it wasn't enough. We can't just be average. I've had so many average mediocre lecturers, White, mediocre lecturers and tutors. But because she was a Black woman, she had to be just that much more exceptional. It wasn't okay that she had an accent, even though we've had different Chinese lecturers, Indian lecturers, like really broad Scottish, lecturers. No one's ever said anything about the accent. But because she was Nigerian, suddenly it was so hard to understand her African accent. And seeing that the fact that even someone who was above us as students was still, I guess at risk of such criticism and discrimination, it went to show like we just kept thinking, what are we supposed to do when we finally reach, like, the workplace? Because we have to be so much better than everyone else to even get an ounce of respect. And that's how it is when we see Black characters on TV. If the only thing about them is their race. They're kind of discarded on the side or they have to be like really exceptional characters, they have to be they're really strong and they go through so much discrimination, slavery, and they come out on top. And that's all there is to us. We can't just be average, average people. And that really does affect your mental health because there's now this pressure of being... you need to just be at the top of everything and our parents do the same thing. I know a lot of people who have grown up in the Black community. We know that our parents are you know, you have to work twice as hard. You have to be the best in this class because you're not going to get the same opportunities as like Becky. And, you know, they are going to look for any reason to tear you down. And that kind of pressure on a child is so severe and a lot of the time we internalise that. Because then if we do average or subpar, then it's like, oh, we feel like we have failed to represent our entire community, whereas a White person, my White friends, will fail their class. And that's just a reflection on them. It's not a reflection on the White community. So that's just another way that racism can affect your mental health. It's just there's just no way to escape that.

[00:14:34] Yeah, and it just it enhances and it shows you the inequality that is present in the world. This inequality is also present in the prisons, in a criminal system. And if that's what you'll see in 24/7, you're just left thinking, well, what's the point of me trying. If this is the perception that society already has for me, there's no point in even trying to be better because I just have to do that much more work.

[00:14:58] Yeah, I agree completely. I think one of the key things also about role models, though, is I always have to think that like role models should be an extension of improvement and other fronts as well, because I often find that when speaking about role models are like what I've seen is that oftentimes black people tend to become role models because they have come out of hardship or come out of a situation that was especially difficult. And that presents an image that, like black people, must be exceptional to succeed. And that is true, right? Like the relevance of the fact that, like I was also told from a young age is that I have to work twice as hard to get half of the things that white people get as well. But I think as well, like there's often an argument where people deflect and make and talk about athletes, musicians, entertainers. And of course, I'm proud of like sporting achievements and like black cultural prowess. But I think Black people are so much more than that as well. And I think sometimes the conversation can often deflect when it comes to role models because of the way that Black people are represented, either being in pain and our trauma as represented or were represented in my entertainment industries and sporting industries. And does this does this middle ground this often unrepresented completely where like people like, for example, within academia, there doesn't seem to be any representation of black people, for example, and also in like professions, even though we know statistically, like in the medical profession, that Black people are employed by the NHS, but that isn't represented in popular media.

[00:16:46] I always think about as well, like the first Black hero that I saw on TV and. Honestly, growing up, I didn't really see many does a thing like when we look at heroes for a child that might not be like someone in politics or in medicine. In my very well be, you know, a cartoon character. And when you don't see yourself reflected in my heroic role, that can also affect you mentally, because then you think I am or people that look like me, not capable of being extraordinary in that sense. So it sounds silly. It's like obviously we know that powers aren't real. But to a child, you think, well, why can't people that look like me be a superhero? What can people that look like me get struck by lightning and get power? You know, it's just you think, where why am I not represented in this show? Why are people like me not represented on TV, on in media? And that just creates like there's just like there's just paradox of like visibility and invisibility, because on one hand we're not represented at all. We can't see ourselves on TV, but on the other hand, by being Black, we are hyper aware of ourselves and the world is hyper aware of the colour of our skin. So it's just constantly we're just constantly walking in between the two, like invisible and being very, very visible.

[00:18:18] So how can we change this way that different communities, understand and talk about mental health in different ways and experience it... you know, culturally, it's different. Maybe depending on where you're living in the UK or around the world. How can we break that stigma and give self-esteem to people that are Black?

[00:18:40] I think obviously there's like a lot of work to be done, there's multiple ways to do it. But as we've spoken about, the whole trope of Black people, specifically Black women, as being, you know, strong characters. I think beginning with allowing Black women to be vulnerable. And I guess weak as well, creating the space for us to be those kind of characters would help the stigma of that. We always have to be strong and take everything on and not show weakness by breaking down that stereotype. It would allow us more freedom to express ourselves. That's just one way. Because especially dark-skinned Black women who are hypermasculinised. I think we just need just more representation and more... just create more space for Black women to express themselves would help and not stigma around mental health.

[00:19:36] So I would also say that it's an education, we need to educate individuals and this can be done in so many different ways. One way I do is I talk to my family. I talk to all the kids in my family saying you can do anything you want. And I try and encourage everyone through mentorship programmes that various organisations have. We can you can mentoring and you can encourage it that you can do this, you can do this, you can do that. But also just to educate them that it is a hard process and you have mental health may be affected. I think we spoke to Dr. Yvette Auther, who's a clinical psychologist, and she makes a point of going to either churches or to go to ethnic minorities and tell them these are the signs of mental health disorder. These are the symptoms of mental health. So if you have issues, come and speak to people, come and tell your stories, you know, and just mental health needs in general need to be kept on the agenda. Let people know you can do whatever you want, but it may be hard. It may affect your mental health, but that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

[00:20:34] Yeah, I 100 percent agree with both of what you've said as well. And I think I mean, just going back to the representation point earlier was that it's also because I've recently watched both of the Charlie and the Chocolate Factory movies, and it was funny that was pointed out to me that like these golden tickets were released to the world and there was five white kids that got these golden tickets. And like it's something you don't get like you don't realise as a kid, but then when you re-watch it, you're like huh, this doesn't make any sense. And I think just the very notion of the fact that, like, even as kids we're not exposed to very many Black people in children's media, at least in this country. It forces Black people in this country to become very hard and die a very young age and also have no expectations of how they're going to be perceived. And so I think I know it's like sort of a cliché thing, but like one of the key things that Black

people should think about is reminding ourselves that we should take care of ourselves like self-preservation. And self-care is radical, right? But taking care of ourselves because we've become so accustomed to navigating daily micro aggressions and just various forms of discrimination that we normalise and think is acceptable behaviour when in actual fact it's damaging. So I think just taking care and not being afraid to seek professional help when you need it as well is very important because I think there seems to be a stigma of reaching out and seeking professional help. Mental health amongst certain communities. And I think that isn't necessarily healthy, particularly when we've already normalised so much and so much of our daily trauma comes from just things that we're exposed to.

[00:22:25] I think as well, the problem is we also in the Black community, we need to normalise. I hate that word, but we need to normalise just discussing past traumas, because as Black people, all of us know about generational trauma and the fact that things are families and ancestors experienced, past, trickle down to us and even something as simple as like my mother's upbringing with her family is it affects the way she parented, raised me. And then I have issues with my mental health. And I think where does it stem from? How how why can I speak about her in emotions like that? Because my mother did not do that. And then her mother didn't do that. So I think we need to normalise in the black. We need talking about pastoral matters and problems and the way that we're feeling in our families and stop labelling it a mental illness and depression as a White problem.

[00:23:25] Because even if you look back to representation on TV, because it's so, so important when you see mental, mentally ill characters, they are always White. You do not see a Black person that has depression or anxiety or schizophrenia. So we don't see Black people with those different illnesses. So we think Black people do not get depression. They are strong. They don't get sick. So that trickles down to how medical professionals see us because they think they're tough. We do experience pain the same way. So we need to be able to speak about that kind of stuff, even between each other, and normalise the fact it does happen to us. And once we can do that, we can also tackle the way the rest of the world perceives mental illness in the Black community.

[00:24:18] Yeah. And like so I'm origin Nigerian. And I think in the West African culture, it's very much. Oh, yeah. They don't consider depression as part of mental health. So they will be like this person is just crazy. Not knowing it's psychosis. And it could be due to something else. So it's really going into these communities and educate them that these are all different types of mental health that can happen. You can have anxiety. You can have depression. You can have eating disorders, anything like that. So that they know to look out for these things and just talk about what Rad said about microaggression. I think that is such a big issue. I have laughed off so many micro aggressions in my lifetime that I think this year is the first year I was talking to my flat mate about it like we shouldn't be laughing at these things. They're not funny.

They're not jokes. I know you don't wanna make a scene about these. If we start standing up for all these little things, that would lead to a bigger change eventually in this society.

[00:25:06] And I think it was as well as interesting that you mention Annie that, like within the black community, mental health is not spoken about a lot, even though, like statistically, like in the UK by Black British people are more likely to be diagnosed with things like psychosis and schizophrenia. So like there's also I think it also comes down to the responsibility of medical health practitioners themselves in terms of how are they navigating black people's trauma? Why exactly is the treatment available for people who develop mental health issues because of racism? Are there any provisions specifically available to that? And so I think that's a wider conversation that needs to be had, because I think we very much talk about how racism is institutional and does affect Black people on various different levels. But we don't acknowledge what the repercussions of that are, which is how badly affects mental health. On a broader level.

[00:26:08] I think the problem there as well is the fact that when we are diagnosed, it's like, here you go, you've got depression. And obviously the immediate thing to do if we are even provided with our service is to seek therapy. The problem with that have with that is we're not addressing so many root causes for the reason I might be mentally ill. So why am I depressed? I am struggling with money and I feel like the whole world is against me as a Black woman. So instead of saying, OK, well, you can talk it out, therapist. I do not need a therapist. Principally, what I need is to not face housing discrimination because I'm black. What I need is to not have to go to the shop and think, OK, like who is going to try me today? Who is going to say something about the fact that, for example, my mother once went to Lidl's to get croissants and when she picked up - this was before the pandemic - an older White gentleman behind her asked to get a different tongs because he didn't want to touch the same tongs as a Black woman. So I do not need to be going to the store and facing things like that. We need to address. What can the government and its people do to alleviate mental illness like the cause of mental illness in Black people? And that starts with addressing the racist ideology and the institutions are in place that disproportionately affect us. I don't think that we can really get far before attacking those problems like assault, poverty proportionately affects BAME people, specifically Black people. Address that. Don't ask us why we're sad. I'm homeless. Like, obviously I'm going to be stressed out. So I think the government just needs to do more than just put buzzwords like or talk reach out to a friend. I guess those things are well and good, but they're not going to eradicate mental illness.

[00:28:07] Is there any particular resource says that any of you guys have found helpful specifically for black people in the situations that you guys have explained? Is it anything that you find particularly helpful which, you know, might benefit to any of our listeners?

[00:28:24] So some of the resources that I know there is the Black African Asian Therapy Network who have quite a variety of blogs, and they've got a right of podcast that people can listen to. And they also have a reading list as well. There's also a podcast called Therapy for Black Girls, which again covers mental health issues and allows people like to get out of your head and hear someone else talk about any issues that you might be dealing with. And then finally, I also have Dr. Yvette Aurther, who is a clinical psychologist. And on her Instagram, she has many, many resources for people to use and she can even direct people to an appropriate resource as well.

[00:29:00] There's also I'm not sure they're still doing it. I believe so. Our Black Minds Matter UK were raising money right around. I think it was around June, July in order to like, try send pay for therapy for as many Black youth as possible in the UK. So I believe that was just the case of like contacting them and getting in touch with the therapist that they recommend on the website. And then they tried to get at least your first session paid for. So I think that's really a really vital resource to have. And also just finding comfort communities where you are. So in Aberdeen, that might be like different. ACS there's the BAME forum as well. We are working to create a safe space for Black people and being people to just express themselves and connect with other Black people in Aberdeen. We have a world there's the world mental health issue coming up in October where we will be tried to link students to different resources so whether it be podcasts or playlist to listen to, to relax or different things like that. So I think just finding. A comfort community where you are could help. Just being able to speak to someone that understands you don't have to explain why you feel the way that you do, they understand. Oh, I'm Black, too. I understand how you feel. And then you can, like, kind of just distress through that way.

[00:30:34] Locally, as well as the Grampian Regional Equality Council that provides the counselling service for specifically Black and minority ethnic individuals to speak about. If you're affected by hate crimes, prejudice, racism or discrimination, and they're qualified to provide a safe environment to speak about what's happened. So that's a service that's currently available. Also, I've seen there are a few like pages just on line one that I can think of off the top of my head, that Scotland specific would be I think it's so we glow, and so dot we dot grow on Instagram. And that's like a student from St Andrews who's providing mental health like help and in front from the perspective of a Black person. So I think there are a lot of general resources online. Obviously, they shouldn't be a replacement for like medical services, but they can be in conjunction with it because as Annie's described earlier, a lot of the medical services do not go into the root of why specifically Black people are affected by mental health issues such as depression.

[00:31:42] We also forgot to mention there's Black Medical's the Black Medic, Scotland, and we're here to help students as well. We're here to talk to anyone it wants to talk. We can refer you to any resources and

we aren't. You don't just have to be a medical student, dentist or P.A., so you can just reach out to us on our BMS Aberdeen Instagram or BMS Aberdeen Facebook.

[00:32:04] I think since we offered quite a few resources on like what we can do and what resources are available to black people. I think it's important to see what resources are not helpful that I think personally I'm that is a lot of societies on campus I've noticed on the university itself, has put in place sort of systems where you report racist things that have happened to you and I've seen a lot of companies doing it now. We are starting a forum. If you guys want to send us, tell us exactly like a reporting system where, like you tell us what racist things are happened to you. I think that that is a very shallow and performative way of like, tackling, so to speak, racism, because having us relive our trauma without putting in place actual steps and tools and resources to tackle those very things we're discussing is useless, then we're just in a cycle of telling everyone, just all the racist things that happened to us. But what exactly is the institution doing? What are you gonna do with this report that I have now sent you? So I think that the university needs to kind of wake up from that and decide and realise that having us tell them that racism is bad, and that people are racists on campus is not really going to is not the radical idea that they think they think it is.

[00:33:25] Yeah, I think I would, I'm inclined to agree as well. I think simply implementing a system where people can basically report their trauma isn't enough. I think part of reporting or an effective way to tackle racism while also getting input from students is by ensuring that they're safeguarded. And there needs to be a level of responsibility on behalf of an institution that, first of all, there is happening on a systemic level. And secondly, also that there's a level of safeguarding of these students and some that whatever is spoken about will be dealt with and in a manner that goes beyond just, oh, we're sorry this has happened to you. So I think it's a very complex issue of like sort of navigating how institutions are, especially in light of like Black Lives Matter and things like that, going to navigate the increase in reporting of racism on campus because it's not as if it hasn't been happening previously. It's just that now black people finally have a voice to be able to speak on a lot of the discrimination they faced. And yeah, that, again, leads to mental health and the provisions are going to be provided there.

[00:34:51] Thank you so much, guys, for coming along today and sharing your stories. I know that may have caused some trauma. Kind of going back into your past that you can share these stories which may be able to help others. So I'm really appreciative. I am sure our listeners will be, too. I would just like to say that if you're struggling, please remember that help is out there and there is support. You know, the resources that the guys have chatted about here. We will leave links of these resources in the comments section. So if anyone is struggling, please use your resources that are available. I would also just like to finish off by saying thank you so much for listening and obviously to our guests for coming along. And I hope you'll tune in next time for our next episode. And again, thank you so much.

[00:35:46] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.