Understanding and dealing with racial discrimination

Few would dispute the fact that discrimination is a major problem in our society, and in times of uncertainty, discrimination is often exacerbated. On the occasion of International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, UN Volunteer Reuben Ibaishwa in Ethiopia, who works as a Stress Counselor at the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), shares his thoughts on dealing with racial discrimination.

Racial discrimination can have a huge impact on our health as it decreases an individual’s self-esteem and self-control and increases the possibility of getting involved in unhealthy behaviors. People who face discrimination may experience higher mental health problems like stress, depression, anxiety, high blood pressure and substance abuse.
Discrimination can be damaging, regardless of your personal experiences. It can be equally stressful by being a member of a certain group that is discriminated against the most. The anticipation of discrimination creates its own chronic stress.

Then how can we deal with discrimination? Although we cannot control how people treat us or react when they see us, we can control our response towards their behaviours.

Our ability to make a difference in the course or consequences of some events is often helpful in dealing with stressors – the ability to simply control your emotions can be a key factor in finding peace. Here are six ways you can deal with racial discrimination:

- **Focus on your strengths**: Focusing on your core values, beliefs, and perceived strengths can motivate you to succeed and may even buffer the adverse effects of bias.
- **Seek support systems**: The problem with discrimination is that people can internalize others’ negative beliefs, even when they are false. You may start to believe you are not good enough. Family, friends and colleagues can remind you of your worth and help you reframe those faulty beliefs.
- **Get involved**: Support doesn’t have to come from people in your family or friends. Whether locally or online, you can always get involved with like-minded groups and organizations. Connecting with those who have had a similar experience will help you figure out how to address situations and respond to discrimination in ways you haven’t thought of.
- **Help yourself think clearly**: Being the target of discrimination can stir up a lot of strong emotions, including anger, sadness and embarrassment. Such experiences often trigger a physiological response, too; they can increase your blood pressure, heart rate and body temperature. Try to check in with your body before reacting. Slow your breathing or use other relaxation exercises to calm your body’s stress response. Then you’ll be able to think more clearly about how you want to respond.
- **Don’t dwell**: When you experience discrimination, it can be hard just to shake it off. People often get stuck on episodes of discrimination. You might want to speak out or complain, but you’re not sure how to go about it. Instead, you end up ruminating and repeatedly thinking
about what you should have done. Research shows that while traumatic experiences are a significant cause of anxiety and depression, people who dwell on negative thoughts and experiences report more stress and anxiety.

- **Seek professional help:** Discrimination is challenging to deal with and is often associated with symptoms of severe depression. Stress counselors can help you manage stress, depression, and anxiety and help you find healthy ways to cope. Seeking professional help doesn’t mean you are weak; we can be very strong and still need support from time to time in our lives.

Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**