Perceived Age Discrimination Worse For Health Than Perceived Racism And Sexism, Study Finds

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People who believe they've suffered age or weight discrimination actually have poorer health than victims of racism and sexism, a new study has found.

The research, from the Florida State University College of Medicine, grew out of a study measuring changes in health over a four-year period that was published in the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry.

"Our previous research showed that perceived discrimination based on body weight was associated with risk of obesity. We wanted to see whether this association extended to other health indicators and types of discrimination," said lead author Angelina Sutin, assistant professor of behavioral sciences and social medicine, in a written release. "What we found was unexpected and striking."

The researchers found that older adults who believed they were victims of weight discrimination or age discrimination suffered significantly worse physical and emotional health and greater declines in health compared with those who did not report experiencing such discrimination.

In contrast, perceived discrimination related to race, sex, ancestry and sexual orientation was largely unrelated to health declines in older adults.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/08/age-discrimination-health_n_5290543.html?view=print&comm_ref=false
More than 6,000 adults -- participants in the Health and Retirement Study -- were evaluated. These adults reported their physical, emotional and cognitive health in 2006 and 2010 and also reported their perceptions of discrimination.

"We know how harmful discrimination based on race and sex can be, so we were surprised that perceived discrimination based on more malleable characteristics like age and weight had a more pervasive effect on health than discrimination based on these more fixed characteristics," Sutin said in a written release.

The only exception? Loneliness.

Loneliness was the most widespread health repercussion of discrimination among older adults. Discrimination based on every characteristic assessed in Sutin's study was associated with greater feelings of loneliness. According to previous studies, the effects of chronic loneliness are severe: increased risk for unhealthy behaviors, sleep problems, cardiovascular risk factors and suicide.

A large number of older adults say they've experienced age discrimination: 63 percent, according to a recent study.

Over the years, many experts have found that perceived age discrimination can be linked to health problems such as chronic stress and a reluctance to visit a doctor.

Despite the above, there continues to be a racial gap when it comes to life expectancy; average life expectancy for African Americans was 3.8 years less than that of whites in 2010, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. African American adults are much more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, and from heart attack and stroke deaths, than white adults.