

What Is Racial Imposter Syndrome and How Is It Impacting Micronesians' Mental Health?

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I recall listening to a [podcast episode](#) of NPR's *Code Switch* a few years ago and learning of the term "racial imposter syndrome."¹ As a child of the Micronesian diaspora, the term and episode hit me hard. Racial imposter syndrome (RIS) at its base is a feeling of inadequacy. This emotional response stems from feeling like a fraud (or imposter) of one's racial or ethnic identity. Many descendants from diasporic communities are at risk of RIS.

Additionally, people of mixed race and those who feel they do not fit the stereotypes or expectations of their racial identity can feel RIS. Very commonly, those impacted are persons from diasporic communities—both first and second generations who find the complexity of straddling two cultures can often result in RIS. With Micronesians being a newer diasporic community to the United States, many are at risk of RIS.

Many Micronesians in the United States come from COFA Communities (collectively, citizens from the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Marshall Islands, and Palau who reside in the United States of America). A 2020 US Government Accountability Office (GAO) [report](#) found

that more than 94,000 COFA residents live in America. With a community that has grown 68 percent from the GAO's prior census study, the potential risk of Micronesians being impacted by RIS is growing.

As a mental health therapist who has over a decade of experience in behavioral health, I understand identity can deeply impact a person's emotional well-being. This phenomenon is not new. More than a decade ago, studies found that ethnic-racial socialization—when parents teach their children the meaning of race and ethnicity, as well as how to prepare for discrimination based on race and ethnicity—was associated with favorable with outcomes of those children's adjustment outcomes and academic achievement.²

Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that RIS, or not feeling completely aligned with one's racial identity, could impact your overall mental health. Further research on ethnic-racial socialization found a correlation with parenting that fostered meaningful race and ethnicity discussions, as well as discussions around how to prepare for discrimination and how these styles

¹ Donella, Leah. *Code Switch*, NPR. "Racial Impostor Syndrome: Here Are Your Stories." January 17, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/01/17/578386796/racial-impostor-syndrome-here-are-your-stories>.

² Hughes, Rodrigues, et al. "Parents' Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices: A Review of Research and Directions for Future Study." <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16953684/>.

positively impacted combat against depressive symptoms.³

While there is limited research on RIS as well as racial identity in Micronesians, I am not remiss to mention that additional research should be explored. In June 2023, I offered an opportunity to persons who identify as part of the Micronesian diaspora to join a support group meeting. During the meeting, a group of participants were provided resources and time to explore RIS in congruence to how it has impacted their feelings in society. Without disrespecting the privacy and intricate details of those who attended, the general themes that resonated included: a feeling of not belonging, feelings of discrimination, and cultural disconnection.

In November 2020, I shared a deck of slides on social media that received over 300 likes.⁴ The post reminded Micronesians that they are undisputably the race and identity they claim based on ancestry/descendancy. Tips were provided including to explore therapy, find ways to connect to one's heritage/culture, and seeking education on RIS for further awareness. Due to the popularity, an additional deck was shared with potential ways of knowing one may suffer from RIS. This was followed up with affirmations reading "You are Micronesian no matter what music you listen to, food you eat, even if you don't speak the language, etc."

During *Code Switch's* podcast episode one Native American impacted by RIS described feeling like being treated as "just another

tourist" when attending powwows. The podcast went on to share concrete quotes from some of their 127 emails explaining feelings of RIS. The support meeting provided a space for storytelling which identified similar sentiments.

So where do we go from here? Just as our ancestors explored, we, too, must act to broaden our horizons. For one, research. While my vocation is not in the research space, I would love to encourage and read more researchers' dives into RIS and its impacts on Micronesians and Micronesian Americans. To tag onto this suggestion, I would love even more research on the impacts this phenomenon has on the mental health of our community. As shared, I have over a decade of experience in the mental health field and after leading a support meeting on this topic, there is much to be explored. At the very base, a lack of belonging elicits feelings of loneliness. Loneliness has been proven to be directly correlated with depressive symptoms. The Patient Health Questionnaire (tool) is widely utilized by clinicians to measure depressive symptoms and asks directly about feelings of isolation.

Second, while research impacts communities from a macro-level, this is important as we come from a collective culture. However, we are Micronesians and from a micro-level, it is important that if you feel RIS is impacting your well-being, meeting with a therapist or at very least, a trusted person can be impactful. Many people say they do not know how or where to find this resource. Many communities have local schools that provide free or low-cost services to the community.

³ Neblett, Banks, et al. "Racial Identity Mediates the Association Between Ethnic-Racial Socialization and Depressive Symptoms" 2013, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23647330/>.

⁴ For Micronesians by Micronesians. Instagram. Nov. 2020. www.instagram.com/formicronesiansbymicronesians.

Some communities provide 211, a service where you can dial “211” on your phone and ask about local resources. For Micronesians who are students, there are counselors and mental health professionals often built into those systems that can be utilized.

Lastly, from a mezzo level, just as I shared, I created a support group. Support groups do not have to be created by mental health professionals or clinicians. While it is wonderful if that is the case, many community support groups are run by the group itself. These safe spaces create an open dialogue for belonging, care, and normalizing the plights that often make us feel alone.