AI and Health Equity: A Cautionary Tale for People of Color

by Sheila Thorne

Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerged as a formal field in 1956 at the Dartmouth Summer Research Project at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. After decades of advances and setbacks, AI is now valued for processing large datasets, learning patterns quickly, and supporting decision-making.

AI adoption in U.S. healthcare is accelerating at warp speed to address inefficiencies, workforce shortages, and uneven outcomes. In 2023, healthcare AI investment reached $1.4B, with organizations using AI to automate administrative work, streamline clinical operations, and improve outcomes—especially for underrepresented and underserved patients.

AI is reshaping pharmaceutical clinical research by accelerating drug discovery and development. Where one new drug often requires 10–15 years and about $2.2B with no guarantee of approval, AI methods may reduce timelines and costs substantially—helping deliver therapies sooner, including for conditions that disproportionately affect marginalized communities of color such as heart disease, cancer and infectious diseases.

However, major risks remain: health outcomes for people of color are poor—even among insured and middle-class patients. A key contributor is limited representation in AI development: fewer than 20% of practitioners are women and fewer than 2% are people of color. Clinical evidence has also been historically skewed toward white, urban, middle-aged men, in North America and then generalized

AI models trained on incomplete, biased, or unrepresentative data can reproduce and amplify disparities. The tech adage "Garbage in, garbage out" (GIGO) applies: weak inputs yield unreliable outputs, which can lead to misleading treatment recommendations and further embed inequities in care.

To realize healthcare AI's benefits across populations, priorities include:

- Diversify AI teams: Recruit and advance women and people of color in AI research, development, and leadership.
- Build representative datasets: Ensure clinical trials reflect U.S. diversity, with targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups.
- Engage communities: Partner with community organizations to build trust and align solutions to real needs.
- Improve transparency: Document data sources, limitations, and bias risks; set clear accountability for outcomes.
- Share what works: Publish case studies where AI reduces health disparities or improves health outcomes for marginalized groups.

AI is revolutionizing healthcare, but benefits will be limited without inclusive design, equitable data, and accountability. Prioritizing representative evidence and transparent practices can help healthcare AI improve outcomes for all—especially populations historically left behind.

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Science Advice on Ways to Handle Stress Better

Healthy daily habits may do more than support physical health, they may also help the mind stay adaptable when stress strikes.

Do you ever feel mentally stuck when stress hits, as if you cannot handle what is happening? New research from Binghamton University suggests that simple habits such as eating a healthy breakfast, exercising, and getting enough sleep may help build psychological flexibility, a quality that plays an important role in how people respond to stress.

Psychological flexibility is the ability to adjust your thoughts, emotions, and actions as situations change, while staying balanced and constructive. Rather than feeling trapped by stress, people with stronger psychological flexibility can pause, understand what they are feeling, and respond in a healthier way.

"You might know someone who stays cool under pressure," said Lina Begdache, an associate professor of health and wellness studies and lead author of the study. "The kind of person who misses a flight and, instead of panicking, calmly adapts to the situation. This person may still feel stressed, but they're better able to manage it through psychological flexibility."

Lina Begdache, associate professor of health and wellness studies at Decker College of Nursing and Health Sciences, studies the interaction between food and mood. Credit: Binghamton University, State University of New York

"People may say that these are resilient people, but they also have what's called psychological flexibility. They're able to change the way they think about the situation and then use brain resources to handle the stress."

Begdache and her colleagues, former Assistant Professor of Physical Therapy Binghamton Jason Cherry and former student Alexander J. Talkachov, carried out an anonymous survey of about 400 college students. The questions covered diet, sleep habits, exercise frequency, and other lifestyle factors. The results showed that steady healthy habits, including regular exercise and eating breakfast, are linked to greater psychological flexibility. That, in turn, is associated with stronger resilience and a better ability to cope with stress.

Key findings from the study include:

People who sleep less than six hours tend to have lower resilience and lower psychological flexibility

Eating breakfast five or more times a week is associated with greater resilience through psychological flexibility processes

Exercise, even for 20 minutes or more, is associated with psychological flexibility and resilience

Taking fish oil multiple times a week can help with psychological flexibility

By contrast, low psychological flexibility, or rigid thinking and behavior, is associated with unhealthy habits such as eating fast food and not getting enough sleep.

Begdache said psychological flexibility helps people "step back" and use the brain's resources to better understand and process emotions. She also said people may be able to strengthen that flexibility through improvements in diet and lifestyle.

"When we're under stress, we feel like we fuse with the stress. We live the stress. But psychological flexibility is like stepping back and thinking, 'I feel this because of that. What can I do?' Identifying your emotions sometimes helps you find the solution for these emotions," said Begdache.

Begdache's earlier research found that high-quality diets boost resilience while poor diets reduce it. This study adds a critical piece: psychological flexibility is the pathway through which diet and lifestyle shape resilience.

"The new finding here is that diet and lifestyle don't just make you resilient by themselves. They help you build the psychological flexibility, which, in turn, makes you a resilient person."