How Does Mental Health Challenges Impact the African American Community?

According to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, African Americans are 20% more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population. This can likely be attributed to the challenges African American face daily living in a world that has not embraced them and continues to devalue their contributions.

Common mental health disorders among African Americans include:

- **Major depression**
- **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)**
- **Suicide**, among young African American men
- **Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, because African Americans are more likely to be victims of violent crime

African Americans are also more likely to experience factors that increase the risk for developing a mental health condition:

Social Determinant Factors include:

- **Homelessness**. People experiencing homelessness are at a greater risk of developing a mental health condition. African Americans make up 40% of the homeless population in this country.
- **Poverty**. African Americans are disproportionately affected by poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment. 12% of African Americans live in deep poverty (less than 50% of the federal threshold), compared to 6% of all people in the United States.
- **Exposure to violence**. Increases the risk of developing a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. African American children are more like to be exposed to violence than other children.
- **Incarceration**. African Americans although only 13% of the U.S. Population were found to be 38% of the state prison population in a recent study.
Issues to Consider

Below we highlight different reasons that prevent African Americans from seeking treatment and receiving quality care.

Lack of Information, Stigma and Misunderstanding about Mental Health

In the African American community, many people misunderstand what a mental health condition is and don’t talk about this topic. This lack of knowledge leads many to believe that a mental health condition is a personal weakness. African Americans may be reluctant to discuss mental health issues and seek treatment because of the justified distrust of health system which has caused great harm to this community by breaking ethical laws. There is also like in many other communities shame and stigma associated with it.

Many African Americans also have difficulty recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions, leading to underestimating the effects and impact of mental health conditions. Some may think of depression as “the blues” or something to snap out of.

Because of the lack of information surrounding mental health issues, it’s not always clear where to find help when you may need it.

Don’t let fears of what others may think prevent you or a loved one from getting better. As we said earlier, 1 in 4 people are affected by mental illness. This means that even if we don’t talk about it, most likely, all of us have one of these illnesses or know someone who does.

Faith, Spirituality and Community

In the African American community, family, community and spiritual beliefs and practices tend to be great sources of strength and support. However, research has found that many African Americans rely on faith, family and social communities for emotional support rather than turning to health care professionals, even though medical and/or therapeutic treatment may also be necessary.

Faith and spirituality can really help in the recovery process but it should not be the only option you pursue. If spirituality is an important part of your life, your spiritual practices can be a strong part of your treatment plan. Your spiritual leaders and welcoming faith community can provide support and reduce isolation. Be aware that sometimes faith communities can be a source of distress and stigma if they are misinformed about mental health or do not know how to support families dealing with these conditions.
Do rely on your family, community and faith for support, but it also might be necessary to seek professional help as well.

**Reluctance and Inability to Access Mental Health Services**

Only about one-quarter of African Americans seek mental health care, compared to 40% of whites. Here are some reasons why:

- **Distrust and misdiagnosis.** Historically, African Americans have been and continue to be negatively affected by racism, prejudice and discrimination in the health care system. Misdiagnoses, inadequate treatment and lack of culturally responsive practices by health professionals breed distrust and prevent many African Americans from seeking or staying in treatment.

- **Socio-economic factors.** play a part too and can make treatment options less available. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2012, 19% of African Americans have no form of health insurance. The Affordable Care Act is making it easier and more affordable to get insured. However wait times to be seen continue to be a problem.

- **A lack of African American mental health professionals.** Only 3.7% of members in the American Psychiatric Association and 1.5% of members in the American Psychological Association are African American. Although these workforce figures are higher in California, funding to provide African American specific services is lacking even after MHSA funding. Most California Counties have no African American specific treatment or prevention and early intervention services for African Americans as do other most other ethnic communities. African Immigrants with language and other barriers also don’t get receive much needed resources. People of African Descent whether a consumer, family member or community stakeholder voice is also not as present in influencing policy decisions.

**Medications**

Some studies indicate that African Americans metabolize many medications more slowly than the general population, yet we are more likely to receive higher dosages and the older generation of medications. This often results in a greater chance of negative side-effects and a decreased likelihood of sticking with treatment. Most health plans don’t consider learning more about ethno-pharmacology or utilize it as a tool to better discern dosage etc.

**Provider Bias and Inequality of Care**

Conscious or unconscious bias from providers and lack of cultural competence and respect for culturally responsive approach results in misdiagnosis and poorer quality of care for African Americans. Too often decisions about how to meet the mental health needs of African Americans are made by individuals who don’t carry the skills set to make culturally informed decisions and approach the work from a one size fit all
practice. That amounts to cultural malpractice and continues the cycle of inappropriate services that do little to improve outcomes.

African Americans, especially African American women, are more likely to experience and mention physical symptoms related to mental health problems. For example, you may describe bodily aches and pains when talking about depression. A health care provider who is not culturally competent might not recognize these as symptoms of a mental health condition. Additionally, African American men are more likely to receive a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia, when expressing symptoms related to mood disorders or PTSD.

Given this racial bias, and the negative impact they have on our care, it is easy to understand why so many African Americans mistrust health professionals in general and avoid accessing care. While you have a reason to doubt whether professionals will mistreat you or not, don’t let this fear prevent you from seeking care. The section below gives ideas on how to find the right provider for you.

**Finding the Right Provider for You**

**Cultural Responsiveness in Service Delivery**

Culture—a person’s beliefs, norms, values and language—plays a key role in every aspect of our lives, including our mental health. Cultural competence is a doctor’s ability to recognize and understand the role culture (yours and hers) plays in treatment and to adapt to this reality to meet your needs. Unfortunately, research studies have shown lack of cultural competence in mental health care. This results in misdiagnosis and inadequate treatment. African Americans and other multicultural communities tend to receive poorer quality of care.

However, you can improve your odds of getting culturally sensitive care.

While we recommend you go directly to a mental health professional since this is their area of expertise, if you do not feel comfortable right away, a primary care doctor is a great place to start. The primary care doctor may be able to start the assessment process to determine if you have a mental health condition or assist you in getting a referral to a mental health professional.

Unfortunately, while you may prefer finding an African American mental health professional, this is not often possible since there are a small percentage of African American providers. Thankfully, professionals are increasingly required to learn how to effectively treat people from diverse backgrounds. However, as mentioned before, many providers still lack cultural competence and do not know how to effectively treat African Americans.

When meeting with your provider, ask questions to get a sense of his or her level of cultural sensitivity. Do not feel bad about asking questions. Providers should expect and welcome questions from their clients since this helps them better understand you and what is important to you. Your questions give your doctor and health care team
important information about you, such as your most important health care concerns. Here are some questions you could ask:

- Have you treated other African Americans with successful outcomes?
- Have you received training in cultural competence or on African American mental health practices?
- How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our communication and my treatment?
- How do you plan to integrate my beliefs and practices in my treatment?

Your mental health provider will play an important role in your treatment, so make sure you can work with this person and that you communicate well together. Mention your beliefs, values and cultural characteristics. Make sure that he/she understands them so that they can be considered in the course of your treatment. For example, mention whether it is important for you that your family be part of your treatment.

This Fact Sheet was updated and provided to you courtesy of Black Minds Matter 2!

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