Mental Health for Persons from Historically Marginalized Populations

What happens at the intersection of mental health and one’s experience as a Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color in America? What about at the intersection of mental health and the LGBTQ+ community or People with Disabilities community? Across our country, people’s experiences of mental health vary greatly, and being a member of a community that has historically been marginalized gives one a unique perspective on the challenges and barriers to accessing appropriate mental health care.

Sharing a cultural experience – like values, family/friend connections, expression through spirituality or music, reliance on community networks and faith-based or non-faith-based organizations – can be enriching and a great source of strength and support. However, another part of this shared experience is facing discrimination, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and inequity that can significantly affect a person’s mental health. Being treated or perceived as “other than” or “less than” because of the color of your skin, your gender identity, your sexual orientation, a visible or invisible disability, or anything else so connected to our basic identity can be stressful and even traumatizing. It often means facing additional challenges accessing the care and treatment needed for a variety of reasons.

Disparities in Mental Healthcare

According to a report of the Surgeon General entitled, “Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity,” disparities lie in the availability, accessibility, and quality of mental health services for racial and ethnic minorities.

These disparities manifest in multiple ways, such as:

- A lack of availability of qualified providers.
- Transportation issues, difficulty finding childcare/taking time off work.
- The belief that mental health treatment “doesn’t work.”
- The high level of mental health stigma in many populations and communities.
- A mental health system weighted heavily towards non-minority values and cultural norms.
- Bias and discrimination in treatment settings, including racism, ableism, homophobia, etc.
- Language barriers and an insufficient number of providers who speak languages other than English.
- A lack of adequate health insurance coverage (and even for people with insurance, high deductibles and co-pays make it difficult to afford).

When a person is experiencing challenges with their mental health, it is essential for them to receive quality and culturally competent care. This can be difficult to find in some areas, and even when you do find that care, you also need to find someone you are personally comfortable working with on your issues. If you don’t trust the therapist enough to be fully honest with them, you’re probably not going to be able to meet your therapeutic goals with that person.
Culturally Competent Care

When meeting with a mental health provider, it can be helpful to ask questions to get a sense of their level of cultural sensitivity. Providers expect and welcome questions from the individual since this helps them better understand what is important in their treatment. Here are some sample questions:

- Have you treated other people in my community?
- Have you received cultural competency training with my population?
- How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our communication and my treatment?

When you seek help from a mental health professional, you should finish your sessions feeling heard and respected. You may want to ask yourself:

- Did my provider communicate effectively with me?
- Is my provider willing to integrate my beliefs, practices, identity, and cultural background into my treatment plan?
- Did I feel like I was treated with respect and dignity?
- Do I feel like my provider understands and relates well with me?

The relationship and communication between a person and their mental health provider is a key aspect of treatment. It’s very important for a person to feel that their identity is understood by their provider to receive the best possible support and care.

Past Traumas Affect Mental Health

Chronic Trauma. Whether an isolated incident or ongoing experiences of rejection, microaggressions and flat-out aggressions can not only be traumatic, but they can have long-term implications on your mental health. You may experience increases in emotions including anger, anxiety, depression, jealousy, confusion, or sadness. It can also negatively impact your self-worth and self-esteem. Sadly, discrimination, including labeling, stereotyping, denial of opportunities or access, and verbal, mental and physical abuse are common experiences for many Americans in underserved populations. At the very least, the amount of energy it takes to deal with the likelihood of an aggressive act happening can be draining, and to keep advocating for yourself and others can be exhausting. Vicarious trauma is also a threat to mental health as everyone has heard stories about people in underserved communities being attacked and/or losing their life such as Matthew Shepard, George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and many others.

Substance Use. One potential ripple effect of social rejection and/or trauma is substance misuse or overuse as a coping mechanism or method of self-medication. This usage does not actually help the situation, but it makes sense when you think of the emotional energy it takes to fight oppression.

Suicide. Many people in underserved communities struggle in silence and face worse health outcomes as a result. Left untreated, anxiety and depression can both lead to suicidal thoughts. If left unaddressed, suicidal thoughts can lead to acting on those thoughts.
Even if you are not currently facing one of these concerns, you may experience a nagging worry or fear of them happening to you. This can lead to a chronic stress response and impact your emotional and physical wellbeing.

**Self-Care Strategies**

**Practice Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is the state of being grounded in the present moment, not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Taking a few minutes each day to practice mindfulness has been shown to help build resiliency. Check out apps such as Calm, Headspace, or Insight Timer for guided meditations. You can also find free meditations on YouTube.

**Move Your Body.** Exercise and movement not only reduce stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, they also stimulate the release of endorphins in your brain, which helps boost mood. This can be as simple as taking a walk outside, stretching at your desk, or practicing some yoga poses.

**Get Enough Sleep.** Adequate sleep is often overlooked but is an important component of self-care. To feel fully re-energized, aim for 7-9 hours per night with consistent bed and wake times. Avoid caffeine and alcohol before bed as they can disrupt your sleep cycle.

**Connect with Loved Ones.** Humans are social creatures by nature. When facing a problem, it can be beneficial to talk through it with a trusted friend or family member. Conversations with loved ones provide a safe space to explore feelings and get support.

**Listen to Affirming Music and/or Podcasts.** Surrounding yourself with the music or words of artists in the community and allies of the community helps to reinforce your inherent value and self-worth.

**Find a Creative Outlet.** Flexing your creative muscles is a great way to channel your energy and feelings. Consider drawing or writing about characters in the community you want to see represented in the world. Or start an art collection of works created by artists in the community.

**Limit Media Exposure.** The news often focuses on what’s not going well in the world and that can be emotionally taxing on us. If you’re feeling overwhelmed, anxious, sad, or angry by what is happening, set boundaries around how frequently and for how long you spend on social media and news outlets. Furthermore, consider avoiding any media sources that are not inclusive of your community.

**Read about Community History.** Whether you’re already familiar or know little about the history of your community and related movements, it can be re-affirming to learn more about the people who began paving the way. You may also gain new insights from how they got through their toughest challenges.

**Know that It’s OK to Walk Away from Oppressive Conversations.** Whether it’s at work or on social media, there are times you’ll be exposed to oppressive rhetoric. While your typical go-to response maybe to challenge those opinions or advocate for the community, it’s also okay to walk away. To make that decision, check-in with yourself. Do you feel emotionally prepared to challenge the rhetoric? If not, you are not a bad person or failure to your community for setting a personal boundary and exiting the conversation to focus on your wellbeing.
Join Your Local Community Activities. Participating in activism can be empowering. Often you will feel inspired and connected by joining forces with others who share your challenges, values, and aspirations.

It’s important to know that you are not alone, you are not at fault, and there are many resources available to support you.

**Additional Resources**

The [Mental Health Coalition](https://www.mentalhealthcoalition.org) list of BIPOC Mental health resources can be found [here](https://www.mentalhealthcoalition.org).

**Mental Health America (MHA) - BIPOC Mental Health** - Mental Health America (MHA) is the nation’s leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and to promoting the overall mental health of all Americans.

**National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** - Provides advocacy, education, and information on the barriers to mental health care and how to seek culturally competent mental health care for underserved populations:

- Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Indigenous/Native
- LGBTQI+
- People with Disabilities

[Ourselves Black](https://ourselvesblack.org) - Provides information on promoting mental health and developing positive coping mechanisms through a podcast, online magazine and online discussion groups.

**TedX: Black Mental Health Matters** – Phillip J. Roundtree

**LGBT National Help Center** - Serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning community by providing free and confidential peer-support and local resources.

- LGBT National Hotline (888-843-4564): available M-F 4:00 pm Eastern to midnight and Sat noon to 5:00 pm Eastern

**Trevor Project** - The leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people under 25.

- Trevor Lifeline (866-488-7386): available 24/7/365
- Trevor Text: text START to 678-678
- Trevor Chat: [https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/)

**The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association** - GLMA is a national organization committed to ensuring health equity for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) and all sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals, and equality for LGBTQ/SGM health professionals in their work and learning environments. [LGBTQ-inclusive medical care provider directory](https://www.glmamedical.org/medical-center-directory)

**WorkplaceSolutions**

[![WorkplaceSolutions](https://www.workplacesolutions.com)](https://www.workplacesolutions.com)
Get involved with the American Association of People with Disabilities - As a national cross-disability rights organization, AAPD advocates for full civil rights for the over 60 million Americans with disabilities by promoting equal opportunity, economic power, independent living, and political participation.

According to the CDC's Disability and Health Promotion, adults with disabilities report experiencing frequent mental distress almost 5 times as often as adults without disabilities: The Mental Health of People with Disabilities | CDC

Harvard University Full list of Anti-Racism resources for self-care:
https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/antiracismresources/bipoc/selfcare

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition list for self-care resources for trauma:
https://boardingschoolhealing.org/self-care-resources/


