

# Coming Out of the Closet on Mental Health

Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-III) has been away from Congress on medical leave for so long that his colleagues have been clamoring to know what's wrong, and NBC's Andrea Mitchell reported that the congressman was receiving treatment for addiction. The truth, according to the Rep. Jackson's staff, is that the congressman is being treated in a residential facility for exhaustion and mood disorders.

Why not say that in the first place?

Because divulging one's mental health status is often the kiss of death in politics and public life. It may be okay in Hollywood to speak of exhaustion, mood swings, and other mental health issues. In that world, treatment is often followed by a late night talk show interview and a career revival. In contrast, any politician who has come out of the closet about his or her mental health gets anything but a hard time.

Senator Thomas Eagleton (D-MO), who had been elected to local, state, and national office for more than a decade, briefly joined the McGovern presidential ticket in 1972. When his medical records were leaked, Eagleton was pushed from the Democratic ticket, because he had long-standing mental health problems.



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Eagleton checked into hospitals three times for physical and nervous exhaustion, was known to have suffered from depression, and reportedly received electroconvulsive therapy twice. While his mental health history was not part of the public record, his hospitalizations led to speculation that he had a drinking problem. Still, he was so effective as a campaigner and politician that he unseated an incumbent Democrat in his race for the United States Senate.

When George McGovern learned that Eagleton had taken the anti-psychotic drug Thorazine, and his doctors had spoken of his "manic depression," McGovern initially supported Eagleton. However, when McGovern learned that Eagleton's depression could return, he asked Eagleton to withdraw from the ticket and he complied.

Even though 77 percent of the American people said Eagleton's medical record would not affect

their vote, Republican opposition was geared up to attack McGovern because of Eagleton's mental health status, and the press showed their ignorance by rather cavalierly referring to Eagleton's "shock therapy." Since men are far less likely to seek treatment for mental health issues than women are, Eagleton showed amazing self-awareness to seek help. He perhaps did not reveal more, and sooner, because he understood the public perceptions, and thus the

ment be a matter of record. Comedians and others joke that when someone appears to behave erratically (or in some cases, extremely mindfully), they must be "off their meds." The stigma remains, and it is stronger in the African American community than the majority community.

Tell an African American friend or colleague about feeling down for more than a week or so (two weeks of down moods is one sign of depression), and he or she will

ma. As widely as post-partum depression is known and discussed, African American women are only half as likely to seek help as White women. Study after study reports the underutilization of mental health services among African Americans.

Women are far more likely to be diagnosed with mood disorders than men are, which puts another burden on men. Indeed, African American men with mood disorders are more likely to rely on informal support systems, or to forego treatment than they are to seek help. Thus, a 2011 study from the School of Social Work at Michigan State University concludes that there is an unmet need for mental health services among African American men.

It is as unfortunate that Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. has been hospitalized for mood disorders as it would be if he were hospitalized for another illness. The fact that he has shared his mental health status may allow Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, to come out of the closet about mental health.

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negative consequences of being open about mental health.

Fast-forward 40 years to Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. Many would argue that we've come along way on mental health awareness, but some would argue the point. Many health plans do not even bother to cover mental health, and if they do, it is covered for a limited number of sessions. Having mental health problems is still enough of a stigma for some professionals to pay for mental health out of their pocket rather than have their mental health treat-

tell you to pray on it. "God will help you through it," they will say. But the Lord helps those who help themselves, and sometimes the help needed won't be found on your knees. Or, the response to manic episodes is "Child, you so crazy," as if that is a badge of honor, not a sign that help is needed. Every indicator we have of mental health utilization suggests that African Americans are less likely to seek help than their White counterparts, and while some of it may have to do with cost, some of it has to do with stig-

# Prostatitis Check: It's Time for Men to Talk About It

It started in my legs. A couple of days later I started feeling a bit weird all evening, as if I were coming down with the flu. I was achy all over. That evolved into weakness and a fever. It certainly seemed as if I had some sort of virus. I was wrong, however. I had developed something called prostatitis. Have not heard of it? It is the inflammation of a man's prostate gland.

While there has been important attention to prostate cancer and the enlargement of the prostate, there is very little attention to prostatitis, despite the fact that about half of all men over the age of 50 get it. The causes seem to vary from a bacterial infection to trauma to unknown causes. What I will tell you is that it makes you feel absolutely miserable.

It is not just that there is little attention to prostatitis but that men seem reluctant to discuss it. Too many Black men want to ignore



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the fact that they even have a prostate. Many of our brothers refuse to have an annual prostate exam – which involves a doctor inserting a finger into your rectum to determine whether the prostate is normal – either out of ignorance or homophobia. In fact, I had one brother once tell me that he was afraid that he would become gay if he had a prostate test! So, as a result both prostate and colon cancers end up becoming silent killers in our communities because no one wants to discuss them.

Prostatitis is not cancer. Yet the pain and frustration associated with it are not publicly discussed. There are various treatments, including antibiotics, but in some cases doctors will recommend changes in diet, exercise, and some other life-style alterations. Prostatitis can return under certain conditions, meaning that it can become a chronic condition about which every man should be aware. Every man also needs to take steps, such as making sure to get exercise and keeping yourself hydrated. But it is also important, if the symptoms emerge, to get to a doctor and not pretend that you are Iron Man and impervious to all pain.

Getting ill in the way that I have experienced it has been a wake-up call on a number of different levels. It has reminded me that I am aging and that while, overall, I take care of myself and feel well, I am no longer 25. It has also

reminded me that there are steps with which I must concern myself to protect my health. Not living in denial is one of the most important.

On top of all of this, however, this experience has reminded me

relative of mine, out of profound discomfort in discussing their body, died of a completely curable cancer that happened to be in their private areas, because they simply did not want to discuss the matter. Time to wake up and smell...the

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that in this society we really do not like discussing our bodies. Yes, we like looking at bodies, but we really do not like coming to grips with the complexities of our bodies. We become shameful or turn serious matters into jokes. In some cases the embarrassment associated for many people with discussions of our bodies leads us to become silent altogether. You think that I am exaggerating? A

green tea!

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