

Blacks Get More Comfortable Talking Mental Health

CDC: Black people are 20 percent more likely to report distress than whites or Latinos

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that there are more than 40 million Americans currently dealing with mental illnesses, not including issues related drug and alcohol use.

But mental health treatment goes far beyond diagnoses and prescriptions.

“You don’t have to be what we know as mentally ill. You don’t have to be schizophrenic or bipolar to seek therapy. You can seek therapy because your dog died, and you just feel sad about it,” says Nikki Davis, a prison psychologist and substance abuse and family therapist in Virginia. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Your weakness comes from [when] you don’t seek the help you know you need.”

Davis was about 10 years old the first time she saw a therapist. One of her siblings seemed to be struggling with an emotional disorder, and her parents felt the whole family could use some help.

May is Mental Health Month and for many Black people, the concept of mental health treatment

is somewhere between laughable and extravagant. Reasons abound for Black people who dismiss mental health treatment.

“In the Black community we are hesitant to trust medical professionals. We think that mental health or mental illness is a White person’s disease. We have a tendency to want to pray it away,” Davis says. “[In therapy] they get an unbiased opinion. You’re going to get a non-judgmental and unbiased environment that is going to be as honest and forthcoming as it can be without damaging you.”

Therapy or counseling involves talking to an educated and licensed medical professional in a safe, confidential, non-judgmental environment.

Regular counseling sessions take place in a comfortable, private office, and are usually about an hour each week or biweekly – but the client can request a different arrangement.

The first visit is a basic meet-and-greet, plus paperwork. The paperwork asks both standard medical questions, as might be



Terrie Williams, award-winning mental health advocate and author of “Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We’re Not Hurting.”

seen in a doctor’s office or hospital, as well as personal life questions, such as “How much sleep do you get each night?” or “Is there any personal or family history of drug use?”

The first few conversations will be light, centering on hobbies, work, and key people. Clients can ask questions of the therapist as well, both personal and as relates to counseling.

In the following session or sessions, the conversation will likely be about whatever led the client to begin therapy.

“A lot of times I’m not [clients’] favorite person. I don’t push and prod for you to make breakthroughs, but I will ask you those questions to make you think. So that’s one thing people don’t like to do, they don’t like to think about their own issues or their own flaws that might be contributing to the negative aspects of their lives,” Davis says. “If I can help someone say, ‘I’m going to break myself out of my own personal hell that I’ve put myself into’ by talking, then I’m going to do just that.”

Everything said in counseling is strictly confidential – therapists cannot tell

relatives or employers anything without the client’s permission, not even a confirmation that a person is receiving counseling. There are two exceptions to this: if the therapist received a subpoena, or if the client is an immediate danger to him/herself or others.

While the need for therapy doesn’t always mean a mental illness is present, a therapist may sense something after several sessions. If this happens, they may suggest an assessment, which range from questionnaires to medical tests depending on the issue. If an undiagnosed mental condition is found, the client and therapist discuss treatment options together, as would happen in any doctor’s office.

Sometimes a counselor can be a bad match for a client. For example, if a counselor doesn’t have experience with the client’s

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that Black people are 20 percent more likely to report “serious psychological distress” than whites or Latinos. Black notables such as Metta World Peace (née Ron Artest), Halle Berry, and writers Mychal Denzel Smith and Bassey Ikpi routinely highlight and contribute to mental health awareness in the mainstream conversation. Ebony, Essence, Jet and Uptown magazines have all featured several pieces on mental health over the past few years.

“So much of what happens in our everyday lives has to do with unresolved trauma. And we see it every single day in our streets,” Williams says. “There’s so much post-traumatic stress disorder in our community. You see somebody shot and killed right in front of you, and then you get up and go to work or school the next day like you didn’t just see that.”

Williams, who is also an award-winning publicist, mental health

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