



African American Mental Health: The Impact of Collective Trauma

African Americans have endured centuries of harms that have recently boiled over into the events we have observed in the last couple of months, most notably the response to the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks. What we are seeing is how the cumulative effect of these and many other deaths in the black community, along with issues such as systemic racism and discrimination, affects our mental health. As a person of African descent, I can attest to how witnessing the video of the deaths of Floyd and Brooks as well as the news stories that followed were simply the latest in a series triggering images that have left me emotionally shaken.

When looking at the history behind this collective trauma (defined as a traumatic psychological effect shared by a group of people of any size, up to and including an entire society)

we can see how it traces back to 1619 when Africans were first brought to the United States, through slavery, followed by the impact of the Reconstruction era, lynching that endured (even until 1981), Jim Crow and most recently with police brutality and mass incarceration. This type of historical trauma is called Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, which was originally theorized by researcher Dr. Joy DeGruy. The result of PTSS is adaptive behaviors that are essentially survival mechanisms employed by African Americans which are passed down generationally.

These circumstances are all detrimental to mental health, however, due to the stigma associated with mental illness, many African Americans do not seek help. Also, a lack of mental health providers of color contributes to the reason why many are unwilling to reach out.

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But over the last few years, I have observed a change in how African Americans look at mental health and how it is being more widely acknowledged as an issue that must be confronted. This is especially true for those who are younger and are more comfortable with discussing these issues. Also, behavioral health providers are engaging in cultural humility training to help therapists who may not be African American to not only learn about the challenges associated with being black in America but also gain a better appreciation for black culture.

In Western New York, many of the community-based behavioral health providers do have therapists of color. One resource to connect with these professionals is the Mental Health Advocates of WNY (mhawny.org or 716-886-1242). Their Information and Referral Department can offer suggestions on where people can go for help.

Additionally, there are national resources that focus on the mental health needs of African Americans. *A comprehensive list can be found on the National Alliance of Mental Illness website.*

As our nation grapples with its complicated past and uncertain future, all people must have access to the resources that can benefit their mental health. Our African American brothers and sisters need access to these supports as well as empathy and understanding to begin this healing process.



Karl Shallowhorn, M.S., CASAC is chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition and President and Founder of Shallowhorn Consulting. He can be reached at karl@shallowhornconsulting.com.

SAVE THE DATE

JOIN US FOR A FACEBOOK LIVE JULY 22 AT 12PM.

A panel of mental health professionals will discuss the topic of Re-entering The World & How To Handle The Stresses Related To Going Back To Work.

MORE DETAILS TO COME!
CHECK OUR FACEBOOK PAGE FOR UPDATES.

July Events

JULY 15 & AUGUST 5

Youth MHFA - VIRTUAL Mental Health First Aid Trainings

JULY 22 & AUGUST 10

Adult MHFA - VIRTUAL Mental Health First Aid Trainings

JULY 15 & 22

Engaging Families in Treatment Services

During these unpredictable times, visit our events page at LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS

For information about mental wellness, stigma and self-care.



ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

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Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members:

BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children’s Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation
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PTSD affects an estimated 3.5% of the American population

AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION

Understanding PTSD by Jennifer Cain, Ph. D.

When the word "disability" is mentioned, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) might not readily come to mind. Yet, the American Psychiatric Association reports that PTSD affects an estimated 3.5% of the American population, and people who have PTSD are entitled to reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

PTSD is an invisible disability that results from having experienced a severe psychologically traumatic event. PTSD includes a range of ongoing symptoms in response to the traumatic event, and people who have it experience various emotions such as terror, horror, shame, guilt, and sadness. Stigma associated with PTSD occurs when people with PTSD are incorrectly or negatively judged because of the resulting emotions or other trauma sequelae. PTSD symptoms can be misinterpreted as disinterest, lack of trust for people they are talking to, personal instability, or poor interpersonal skills, when the person may actually be experiencing emotional numbing, hyper-vigilance, trauma flashbacks, or attempts to avoid a trauma reaction. People with PTSD may be

criticized for trauma reactions they cannot control or blamed for having experienced the traumatic event. Some people view those who have PTSD as weak. Trauma sensitivities are sometimes used to exploit the sufferer. When any of these things occur, people who have PTSD can experience a number of adverse reactions, including anxiety, despair, anger, social isolation, and hopelessness.

In order to reduce the stigma of PTSD, it is necessary to promote understanding of what PTSD is and how it affects the people who suffer from it, as well as fostering acceptance of the things that people with PTSD need. Being aware of what these things are, and adopting behaviors and systems that respect the needs of people with PTSD, are good first steps toward reducing the stigma.



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A Q&A with Harmonia Collaborative Care

We recently spoke with **Valerie Nowack, LMHC, MPA, CEO of Harmonia Collaborative Care** about the stigma of mental illness.

Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma coalition?

As an organization serving individuals with mental illness for nearly 50 years in a semi-rural community, we have seen how greatly stigma can impact utilization of services. Harmonia Collaborative Care understands the importance of standing with other local organizations to reduce stigma as one of the many barriers to receiving help.

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

It is excellent to see all types of organizations, not just mental health, banding together to let people know they are not "inherently wrong" or "broken," and they are not alone. The younger generation seems to have a reduction in stigma. We have even seen some of our teens bring their friends with them and have them wait in the waiting room. They seem comfortable with having a therapist and getting help. The COVID-19 crisis has also shed a light on mental health, as individuals who never had a history with symptoms like depression and anxiety began to experience these things. It "normalized" it, and suddenly those who had been treated for mental illness, became the "experts". The Anti-Stigma Campaign can buoy us through the changing tides and bring mental health to the surface.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Clients and community members have expressed fears of being seen in the waiting room by neighbors and friends. Some have also reported fear that others may see their car in the parking lot. Even some parents have hesitated or removed their teen from treatment based on shame they felt from the community or internalized shame over their impact as a parent on their child's mental wellness. We have had clients with great success stories who fear to share their journey due to how it may be perceived. Not being able to share our stories perpetuates stigma, by allowing others to continue to feel alone in their struggles. ■



BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge.

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at kshallowhorn@chcb.net.