

The Impact of Living in “Survival” Mode: MEE Research on Black Mental Wellness

MEE has conducted focus groups in some of the hardest-hit neighborhoods in America, from the South Side of Chicago to South Central LA, from North Philadelphia to Southeast DC, in post-Katrina Louisiana and more. For the past three years, MEE has also been a key social marketing partner in the innovative “Blueprint For A Safer Philadelphia” violence prevention initiative. Talking to people who live in these communities, one word comes up as a constant—stress (often preceded by violence or other trauma). Trying to make do with less, feeling that America has left no seat for you “at the table,” dealing with poverty and all the various “-isms” in our society...it all comes together to make for poor, Black people who are often angry, depressed or living in fear.

What so many underserved populations experience in their daily lives leads to stress, anxiety and even mental health problems. Though many people exposed to trauma may not fit a classic designation of “mentally ill,” they are emotionally injured, even from just feeling “beaten down” in the struggle to survive poverty, violent communities, poor schools, institutional racism and other social ills. People need many levels of emotional support; historically, too many of them have fallen “through the cracks.” Many who need help are opting out of seeking mental health support. In addition, family members and others around them, struggling too, often don’t recognize the signs and symptoms. Effectively reaching out to families who need prevention and treatment options most could mean the difference between success and failure for a generation of low-income residents.



MEE is now working on a new community-based participatory research project that can get people to start thinking and talking about the issue of mental wellness in the Black community. Without urgent action on a wide scale, mental illness will continue to be unknown, undiagnosed or misdiagnosed in poor Black communities.

MEE is conducting audience research African American parents/caregivers (ages 35+) and young adults (ages 19-22) and community-based service providers in four cities: Philadelphia, PA; Chicago, IL; Washington, DC; and Oakland/Richmond, CA. We have received funding support from The California Endowment, the Washington, DC Department of Mental Health and the City of Philadelphia’s Department of Behavioral Health Services to conduct a total of 16 focus groups.

Because the company prides itself on being socially responsible, it held a series of Chat & Chew information sessions to inform key stakeholders in each research community about this important research project. Our respect for community leaders led us to bring them to the table early on in the planning process, explaining our motives and getting their buy-in and “stamp of approval.”

We also promised to share what we learn, in order to improve the overall emotional and mental health of our community. Community leaders, colleagues, concerned citizens and outreach workers were invited to the sessions, based on the work they do or their personal interest in mental wellness in the African American community.

Because of MEE’s proprietary data collection and technology-driven coding and analysis methodology, we will be able to uncover what low-income African Americans feel about mental wellness. MEE will “get under the surface” of any negative myths or misconceptions about mental illness, explore the cultural and environmental realities that impact the decision-making process about seeking mental health services, and uncover the protective factors that may strengthen coping and survival strategies and prevent mental health issues.

We believe that what we will learn in our multi-city focus group research will help

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