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Black Lives in Hard Times: Stress and Trauma

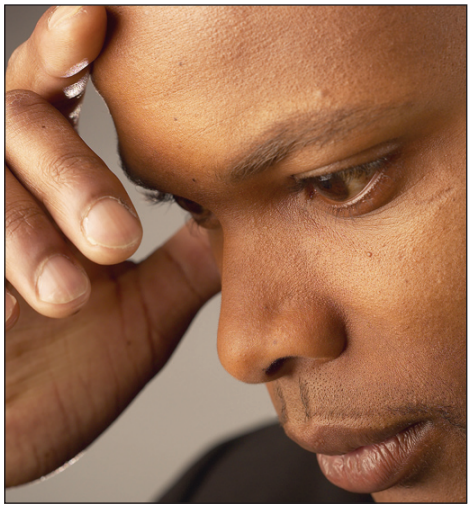
The Need for Culturally-Relevant Mental Wellness Promotion in the Black Community

Growing into healthy adulthood is never easy, but when you're trying to do it in the face of poverty, hopelessness and violence-ridden communities, it doesn't get any easier. Because of the stresses and challenges they face in their daily lives, African American families living in poor and at-risk communities need a strong mental wellness support system. Such a system should be promoted with culturally-relevant messages that de-stigmatize and normalize seeking mental health support as a "sane" response to trauma and constant stress.

In low-income, single-parent households, adults are trying to cope (sometimes through self-medicating) with less money and more problems. Though many of these individuals may not fit a classic designation of "mentally ill," they are emotionally injured, either as the result of traumatic incidents or just feeling "beaten down" in the struggle to survive poverty, racism and other social ills. These families need many levels of emotional support, and currently the mental health system has allowed too many of them to "fall through the cracks." Effectively reaching out to the families who need mental health services most could mean the difference between success and failure for a generation of African Americans.

Changing Community Norms

Community awareness and understanding of mental illness and mental wellness must be substantially increased. That is the first step in reducing stigma, changing attitudes, and ultimately increasing the use of community-based mental



health services. Providers, however, must acknowledge and counter the variety of arguments that many people of color express against seeking help, even as they sometimes describe the world they live in as "crazy." Reasons range from "I don't have a problem" to "I don't want people 'in my business'" to "With the help of my church, I'll pray my way through my problems."

Some of the people who need help will have come from homes that have experienced violence, trauma, death, substance abuse, separated/broken families, chronic depression, struggles to re-integrate into society following incarceration or military service, and child abuse. They would be likely to respond to authentic, credible and action-oriented messages. By promoting mental wellness as a way to deal with some of the limitations placed upon low-income urban residents by society, we can enable those with adverse life experiences to "become stronger in the broken places," by assisting them with recovery and showing them positive ways to heal, cope and thrive.

Understanding the Barriers and Challenges to Promoting Mental Wellness

Audience research could provide a foundation for future communication initiatives targeting low-income communities, creating a community-wide dialogue about mental wellness and putting critical mental health information directly into the hands of the people who need it most. In addition to providing a new source of critically-needed qualitative information for researchers, public health institutions and community-based program directors, comprehensive research findings would better prepare schools, youth service providers and mental healthcare organizations across the country to develop effective, culturally-relevant and user-friendly service delivery models, programs and outreach. UT

What's Inside

From The President

When MEE talks to residents of our nation's hardest-hit communities, one word comes up as a constant—stress. Trying to make do with less, feeling that America has left no seat for you "at the table," dealing with all the various "-isms" in our society... it all comes together to make for some people who are often angry or depressed.

Yet what do we do when we get in those situations where we feel like we can't take it any more? We take it out on our kids or spouse, we eat big portions of comfort foods, we drink or smoke or do drugs as a form of self-medicating. Too often what we *don't* do is get some professional help. Anything that falls below the threshold of "crazy" allows many African Americans to opt-out of seeking competent mental health support.

Reasons, I suspect, include stigma, misdiagnosis and fear of the unkown. Many times, those in the "inner circle"—family members, peers and spiritual leaders of people going through tough times mentally are often confused or uninformed about what they can say and do to help. There are also way too few places in Black communities that offer mental health services that reflect residents' unique challenges and culture. Sometimes those organizations that do exist have no clue how to reach out into the community to spread the word about the "safe space" they offer.

That's why this year, MEE is committed to starting a national effort to help promote mental wellness in African American communities. Across projects, we've seen the results of ongoing stress and trauma—child maltreatment and abandonment, youth violence, obesity, drug/alcohol addiction and more. We hope that you will join us in this important dialogue about how to create new "language" that helps us talk about and understand mental illness, along with a climate that allows families in peril to get the help and support they need.

Ivan Juzang, President
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Stress and Child Maltreatment

Feeling Judged Prevents Asking for Help: The Plight of Black Single Mothers

It's not easy being a young, single Black mother raising young children. Many lead stressful lives with little support and limited financial means. Being a single parent simply exacerbates the stress. Many women say that they receive little to no support from their children's fathers. "I call their help seasonal," one mother explained "It's [support] when it's convenient for them."

Mothers MEE has interviewed said they don't have time during the day for relaxation or "me time." One mother lamented, "I wish that commercial was true about 'Calgon take me away,' because I would buy me a whole bunch." This lack of personal time often leads to drained energy and high levels of stress. "The only time I get time for myself," said a young mother, "is at night when my child is asleep. I might watch TV, clean up or sleep."

Low-income mothers told us that it is rare that someone will watch their children for them so that they can indulge in some private time. "The only time I get a break is if I'm sick," said a single mother. "People will watch my child then." Yet they also said they have to be cautious about with whom they leave their children; they said they only resort to non-relatives when they have no other alternative. "I won't leave my kids with just anybody," one woman explained. "And I try not to leave them with my friends."

Because they have no time for themselves, single mothers said that they often have to find various coping mechanisms for dealing with this stress. Some said they resort to smoking or drinking. "They [the kids] get on your nerves so bad, you have to smoke a cigarette or something," one woman said. Another mother explained, "I go get me a beer and tell my mom to take the kids for a minute." Others told us they close themselves in a room for a temporary reprieve from their children. A mother of several young children shared her strategy: "I go in the bathroom and count to 10." Too many of these stressed-out mothers deal with their children by shouting at and spanking them; in some cases the line is crossed into child maltreatment.

In spite of the challenges they face in their daily lives, in many cases young mothers end up trying to deal with their problems alone. Why? Answers ranged from...

> "Asking for help bothers me because I'm used to helping myself. You don't feel like asking, because I feel like I'm grown. And if I have to ask for help, I feel bad."
>
> "I'd rather do something myself than ask for help."
>
> "Sometimes you're too proud to ask."
>
> "I don't like to ask nobody for nothing. I'd rather go out there and get it on my own."

Many women said that they rely on God and prayer for support and to help them through their tough times. Others believe more money or a better job would solve many of their problems. "If I had a job—that's all I need," said one mother. "I would be able to support my kids on my own, without my grandma." Another mother said that if she could afford it, she would get "someone to come in and take my child for a break."

Many women MEE spoke to contended that friends and family members tend to interject their own judgment and personal opinions, causing them shame and embarrassment. "If you get help from someone you know, they tell you how *they* were raised," explained one mother, while another said, "They judge you [when you ask for help] and ask why you don't have it." This leads many women to not ask for help because they are fearful of being judged, talked about

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Feeling Judged continued...

or even turned down. "People these days are like 'You had those kids and they are *your* responsibility,'" explained one mother who felt she did not receive enough support.

Some women said they would rather seek out support from a community-based organization or even a social service agency, rather than turn to family or friends, because of the anonymity it gives them. "[I prefer] programs, because I don't have to worry about anybody looking at me funny," said one young mother. Some said that seeking support from programs means you can get useful help without being judged by people you know. For example, said one woman, "They might [just] tell you to change some things about yourself, [in order] to see your children change."

Yet other women said they prefer to ask people whom they know personally for help, because of the hassles involved with completing paperwork at social service agencies and even being judged by the personnel there. Many women complained that agencies are too complex, too impersonal and too demeaning. One woman who had dealt with a rude caseworker said, "I had to remind them that they are one paycheck away from being in my predicament. Anything can happen." Because of these experiences, many women who access services do so only reluctantly and for short-term, targeted interactions.

Many women were upset about the kinds of personal questions they are asked at agencies—often they don't understand the point. "They ask questions that don't have anything to do with what you're asking [for]," said one mother, while another said, "They want to know how much alcohol I had in the last week. What does that have to do with getting a check? That ain't necessary." Social service agencies are perceived as hostile and intrusive when offering their support. "Social services [workers] don't know how to talk to people," one young mother said. "They are so hateful. And some people don't want to go through all those hassles to get services." Many women, based on their negative experiences over time, simply do not trust service providers.

Some women feel support organizations are quick to judge. "The organizations tell you what to do, even though they [the people who work there] don't have kids," asserted one young woman. A mother who has felt judged explained her perception of the mindset of agency workers: "They say, 'She's young and doesn't know what she's doing.'"

Yet overall, these women believe that parents are *entitled* to help. "I don't think you should have to ask anybody for help; they should just help you [without you asking]."

There were a few women MEE interviewed who have gotten over their reluctance to reach out. "I didn't used to like to ask for help before, but now I do," said one young mother. "Sometimes you don't know everything." Another mother said she changed her way of thinking out

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A "Pampering" Intervention: Short-term Stress Relief for Young Moms

Attention to the health and well-being of single-mothers is especially important, because these mothers frequently suffer from high levels of stress. MEE recently conducted a project with low-income single mothers in Durham, North Carolina (the city with one of the State's highest incidences of child maltreatment) to determine how to encourage these mothers to seek support to minimize the stress in their lives.

In conjunction with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension of Durham County, MEE offered nearly 100 mothers from a public housing community a day away from stress, at a pampering event just for them. More than just a day of beauty, the pampering events were designed to innovatively reach and teach young mothers about how to better deal with the stresses of being a single parent.

Creating the right environment for promoting support is key. To effectively engage mothers who are struggling just to survive, events should be held in a user-friendly environment that while conducive to learning, also gives mothers the opportunity to relieve stress, make connections with others dealing with similar issues, learn about local support services, and feel like they have what it takes to be a great parent.

A location that can be transformed into a "spa-like" atmosphere, with dimly-lit spaces for indulging in facials, manicures, pedicures, massages and aromatherapy sessions will provide absolute relaxation and stress release. The environment should overflow with calming ambience, in the form of subliminally relaxing music and sound effects, fresh fruit and other healthy appetizers and an assortment of herbal teas and infusions for mothers' delight. Licensed practitioners should be identified and recruited from an array of services.

Continued on page 4

Feeling Judged continued...

of necessity. "You have to get over it," she said, "because the situation is going to get worse if you just sit there and are too proud to ask for help." But many other mothers have not.

So how do we begin to get these women the help they need? What messages will help them begin to overcome fears of being judged when one needs assistance?

The women MEE talked to said they prefer the term "seeking support" over "asking for help." One mother explained, "[The word] 'Support' means I'm doing it for myself, while 'asking' means I'm relying on someone else." Many women felt that the word "help" makes them feel dependent and leads people to judge them. They gave an example of how a peer or other community member should approach them: "Instead of saying, 'I'm going to help somebody,' say 'I'm going to support my sister.'"

To successfully promote the idea of seeking support, these women say that messages should tell parents not to feel ashamed to need help. Instead, young mothers want messages that make them feel comfortable, confident and motivated. They will be turned off by messages that judge or threaten them.

The young mothers told MEE that agencies and organizations should work to make young parents feel more comfortable. "Be understanding!" they said. Social service agencies can increase the number of women who seek out help by focusing on gaining and rebuilding trust—one relationship at a time. There is often resentment on the part of poor African American parents about the insensitivity of service providers and the way that they treat their clients—no one wants to be treated like "a number." These mothers want to be treated respectfully, as individuals and have their personal information kept confidential.

> ***"[The word] 'Support' means I'm doing it for myself, while 'asking' means I'm relying on someone else."***

One cost-effective, culturally-relevant way to make young mothers feel special is to create and execute a series of free "Day of Pampering" events to give them some quiet time and stress release. This pampering concept provides an immediate "change of pace" that can make women be receptive to change and can give them the quiet time to contemplate how they can make it happen for themselves and their young children. *(See sidebar article on page 3 for details.)*

On a broader scale, helping young mothers should include bringing various elements of a community together to rebuild the social fabric in a way that supports mothers and effective parenting. Such a network could include community-based organizations, churches, grassroots agencies, influencers (primarily female relatives) and service providers. Community members should support young mothers in raising their children, instead of chastising them, or saying any problems are *their* fault for having children. With more messages and discussions in the community about supporting mothers, norms will begin to shift, encouraging mothers to seek out support, without stigma. UT

Intervention continued...

During MEE's event, participants were encouraged to mingle and talk with other local mothers. These interactions decreased the feeling of isolation that mothers of young children sometimes feel, and allowed them to see that "they are not alone." A kind of informal "support group" was created through the interaction of these women with similar challenges and interests.

A key feature of pampering events should be a series of "information zones" where mothers can pick up information from community-based organizations about their services and talk to local "experts" about issues that are on their minds. Zones can also include short (10 to 20-minute) small-group learning sessions, on topics such as:

- Effective and age-appropriate discipline strategies for children;
- Information on "ages & stages" of early childhood development;
- How to create balance in one's life;
- Easy-to-implement stress relieving activities;
- Dealing with hyperactive children or those with developmental delays; and
- Job training and development (including GEDs, continuing education and community colleges).

Information zones can link mothers with local community resources that offer information and assistance in a variety of areas that can help make their jobs as parents easier.

These events/interventions are a great start toward encouraging healthy parent-child relationships. An initial evaluation of this project showed that young mothers overwhelmingly felt that the Day of Pampering provided good parenting and stress management information, increased their informal social support networks, and introduced them to resources available in their communities of which they had not been aware. UT

Trauma Due to a National Disaster
Post-Katrina Update: A Portrait of Displaced Residents

A year and a half after disaster struck, former New Orleans residents who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina continue to need information, help and support in order to put the past behind them and rebuild their lives. MEE spoke with a number of low-income African American residents who recalled a unique culture and community, full of dear friendships, close-knit families and fun times in spite of a hard-scrabble existence. "I used to come home from work and complain about my job," said a woman who was now living in Baton Rouge. "But now I wish I had my job and I wish I was back home." A woman who had relocated to Houston said, "My husband made about 50 grand a year selling time shares in the French Quarter…we lived a good life."

Displaced residents were very nostalgic about New Orleans culture, food and activities, including events such as Mardi Gras. They said that life, however, is only a memory.

Knocked Down Twice—But Not Out

Katrina survivors are now trying to make a "new" life, spread across the country. Many displaced residents feel that they have been doubly victimized, first by the storm and then by its aftermath. Unfulfilled promises or offerings of assistance and negative attitudes towards their presence in their adopted cities are just two of the frustrations they mentioned. Katrina evacuees have little trust in their government, their elected officials and mainstream information sources. They said that they were "beat down" by Katrina and now feel that they are getting "beat up" by their government.

Most of their venom was directed at FEMA, but most former residents felt that government at all levels had also failed them. Many feared that they would never get the assistance that they were promised or felt that they deserved. Even now, many were concerned that assistance programs would end before they could get back on their feet. Most complained about the inefficiency of agencies, the long waits that they have had to endure and the inadequacy of the aid provided.

Not All New "Homes" Are Welcoming

Residents who were displaced to places like Houston and Baton Rouge are still getting used to their new cities—learning to navigate public transportation, finding jobs, getting their children settled in new schools and looking for affordable housing. Most do not feel welcomed, feeling that they are being stigmatized. In Houston, they say they are being portrayed as criminals and drug addicts. Said one woman, "We feel like we are being treated like trash." Those who have looked for jobs say they face discrimination based on where they are from. That leaves those who had gained some seniority and experience at their previous jobs particularly frustrated. These realities have made finding a new, stable place to call "home" extremely difficult.

For some parents, new locations offer hope because of the quality of schools for their children, a tremendous improvement from New Orleans public schools, which frequently could not afford enough books for their students or provided poorly qualified teachers as instructors. Some parents are willing to tough it out in these new cities, distant from New Orleans, because of the possibility of an improved future for their children–an opportunity they never really saw back home.

Word-of-Mouth About "Back Home"

While relocation for Katrina survivors has been very difficult, going home also seems complicated, even if they are homesick. Some residents were afraid to jeopardize what little stability they have established, in order to start all over again in New Orleans. They do not want to be pioneers in the development of a "new frontier" and they do not want to put their families at risk. Others wonder what there really is to go home to, especially since the majority of the survivors, jaded by the poor government response to the hurricane and a history of corrupt New Orleans politics, have trouble trusting anyone or anything. "I have a little money saved to go back home," said a New Orleans resident who is staying in Baton Rouge, "but I want to know what I am going back to." Almost everyone MEE spoke with said that they had family and friends who have returned to New Orleans, but they also said that what they hear back is that New Orleans has a long way to go before the city gets back to normal. They hear no guarantees and no assurances of the kind of life that residents left behind.

Rebuilding Trust

Having felt historically lied to and oppressed, reestablishing trust is an important first step with these former residents, who have been deeply traumatized. Several people related emotional and mental health issues consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. They expressed fear of another hurricane disaster and of the levees failing again. "I really don't want to go back because of the fear of another hurricane," said one displaced resident. Another added, "I want to know that the levees are safe [first]."

Yet many displaced residents are open to the idea of returning home, as long as they get the information and support they need, including a promise of stability and security. Much of what displaced residents say they have heard is negative and depressing. They need to hear some reassurance about progress and the future of their beloved city. They want to hear "success stories" about residents who have come home to make a fresh—and successful—start. While very few said they wanted to "dwell on" Katrina, it was clear that many emotional issues remain unresolved. The physical and emotional upheaval must be addressed in a culturally-sensitive manner. There are thousands of families who need treatment and support. Effectively reaching out to them could mean the difference between success and failure for generations of displaced New Orleans residents.

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