African Americans Still Avoid Topic of Mental Illness

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Mental illness is a hush-hush topic in the black community, even though statistics show that many African Americans suffer from these disorders and are less likely to seek treatment, notes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a story reported by The Root.

The CDC's Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities also reported that African Americans are more likely to experience mental health disorders than their white counterparts. What's more, black men were less likely to seek treatment than women. "We treat it as a badge of shame," said Terrie Williams, an African-American mental health advocate, while white Americans "treat it as a badge of honor."

Experts have said that a lack of health insurance or low coverage could be an explanation for why African Americans do not seek mental health treatment. According to the American Psychiatric Association, 20 percent of African Americans are uninsured. In addition, fewer people have coverage for mental health ailments than for physical illnesses.

Historical factors might also contribute to some black people's unwillingness to seek treatment. Years ago, during the Tuskegee experiment, researchers left hundreds of poor black men with syphilis untreated, which ultimately led to their deaths. This is just one example that demonstrates why many African Americans harbor feelings of mistrust toward the medical community.

In addition, according to the American Psychiatric Association, one study found that a majority of African Americans viewed prayer as among the most common ways to cope with stress. Problems can arise when prayer is used instead of medical treatment to address severe mental health conditions, Williams said.

According to Jeff Gardere, PhD, a practicing therapist, the key to addressing mental health conditions and reducing their presence in the black community is for African Americans to embrace mental health treatment. "The point is the mental relief and edge you get from therapy put you ahead of the pack in dealing with life's challenges," Gardere said.

But the good news is statistics show that more black people are seeking treatment for depression and other mental health issues. And the black church has also taken a leadership role in publicly addressing mental health issues, Gardere said.

Depression is one of the most common mental health disorders, affecting nearly 20 million Americans. Click here to learn more about this mental disorder and its relationship with HIV.

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