Prioritizing Mental Health for People of Color

The gap for minority communities in receiving quality mental health care has been a long-known problem, but current events that have hit these communities hardest — with mental health consequences — make it even more critical to address. Here, a local expert offers insight on what needs to be done.

By Arianna Smith

F irst a pandemic. And as we all watch, wait and worry, we start to see a pattern. Blacks, Latinos and Indigenous peoples are dying at a greater rate and are most impacted by the economic fallout. Then the horrible death of George Floyd sparks daily protests around the country, and others in a long-overdue conversation and possible reckoning on systemic racism.

The events in recent months have taken a toll on everyone. But for minority communities, the effects have been worse. African Americans were already 20 percent more likely than white adults to report feeling sad, hopeless and overwhelmed, according to the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. And now those feelings have deepened further for minority communities as the issues in our collective consciousness churn up painful memories and experiences, fear for health and safety and worry for the future.

Today’s unique struggle

Tara Michener, MA, LPC, NCC, a therapist who practices in Novi, says she personally experienced the extra emotional toll of the important conversations happening in recent months.

As a Black woman married to a white man, the issues of racism are not new — and have often driven her work. “When we were dating, some people that he knew and loved had negative reactions to our relationship, and one of the biggest arguments made was, ‘What will you do with the children?’” Michener says. “Clearly that wasn’t OK, but I felt that if people felt bold enough to say that to a grown woman, they would say it to a child.”

Michener, now mother to a 6-year-old girl, has written books for children and teens to help with self-esteem and bullying. “I believe these — from culturally informed micro-aggressions to flagrant acts of racism — are being revisited and rehashed in light of recent events,” she says.

“People need to talk right now. Black people especially. Our country is going through an economic upheaval, and the George Floyd murder really stirred a lot of awareness and emotions. That mixes with the fact that everyone is bunched and at home right now, so it leads to a lot of introspection and awakenings on both sides about how things have been,” Michener says. “But we also know how we think and feel before we can try to converse about these things with each other and see any progress.”

And yet only 33 percent of African American adults who need mental health care receive it, according to the American Psychiatric Association. For Hispanics, that rate is more like 50 percent.

Addressing the gap

Some of the core reasons why minority groups are less likely to get mental health treatment are due to some practical facts. They are less likely to be insured, less likely to have paid time off and less likely to know who or to get misdiagnosed. This leads to more untreated mental health struggles.

Michener says changing the way mental health care is viewed in the Black community is one of the reasons she started her podcast Mental Health Afairns with Tara. Seeing minority celebrities such as Charlamagne the God or Jada Pinkett-Smith talk about and acknowledge their mental health struggles — and talk about how they found help — can also go a long way to break cultural stigma. But it’s not the simple fix.

“When we were raised, as a Black people, we have been subject to a lot of mistreatment and experimentations at the hands of the medical and mental health community, and that created a large sense of distrust, but the stigma is a whole other thing,” Michener says. “If you feel like you’re already going to be discriminated against, you don’t want to admit to needing help mentally and marginalize yourself further.”

Another important step is education within the medical community about how to connect with and understand minority patients. The American Psychiatric Association has reported that Black patients are more likely to not get diagnosed with a mental health problem or to get misdiagnosed. This leads to inappropriate treatment or no treatment at all.

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But what about COVID-19 times, when everyone is seeking therapy less? Michener thinks we have to double down on the importance of mental health care — and that culturally informed understanding of mental health care could improve professional diversity to help bridge this gap in diagnoses among minority patients who are showing up at medical offices.

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The world is heavy lately. Employment, health and social justice concerns have people on edge. That’s particularly true for minority communities who have disproportionately low mental health care access and resources.

For years, we at the Flinn Foundation have been committed to bridging that mental health care gap for people of color by finding more information at FlinnFoundation.org.