

Addressing Anxiety, Depression and Suicide Among HBCU Students

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In the wake the massacre at Virginia Tech and the recent shooting at Delaware State University, student mental health is becoming increasingly important to colleges and universities nationwide.

If the walls of Cicely Evans' office could talk, they would tell of the mental health ailments facing Black college students, including domestic violence, depression, anxiety, stress, unresolved issues of homosexuality and thoughts of suicide.

"The hardest part is getting students through the door," said Evans, a licensed professional counselor at Southern University at Baton Rouge. "Many are afraid of the stigma attached to mental health treatment. Students do not want to be labeled as crazy or weak."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate for Black Americans of all ages was 5.25 per 100,000, nearly half of the overall U.S rate of 10.75 per 100,000 between 2000 and 2004. Black males from ages 20 to 24 had the highest rates of suicide in the Black population, averaging 18.18 per 100,000.

Counselors, therapists, researchers and educators from across the country converged in Baltimore for Morgan State University's Fourth Annual Counseling Center Conference. The three-day event which began Nov. 1 sought to address how to better serve the mental health needs of students attending historically Black colleges and universities.

While many Blacks remain skeptical of psychological treatment, opting for a more spiritual approach to mental wellness, studies show that they are more likely to experience a mental disorder than Whites and less likely to seek treatment.

"The rates of depression and anxiety among African-Americans are similar to those in the general population. Black and Hispanic women are actually more likely to experience severe psychological distress than White women," said Dr. Annelle Primm, director of minority and national affairs at the American Psychiatric Association and associate professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Indeed, it is counterintuitive to believe that Black students who are statistically more likely than their White counterparts to experience poverty, violence, incarceration, abandonment and death are not suffering from mental illnesses.

"Students at HBCUs may be at more risk for suicides and other mental illnesses, because we are not talking about them. Black campuses haven't experienced a large-scale catastrophe like the one at Virginia Tech, but these issues are still prevalent," said Tracy Reed, a registered

licensed professional counselor intern.

Cultural biases and low socioeconomic status are the biggest impediments facing minorities with mental health issues.

Nearly 20 percent of Black Americans are uninsured and living below the poverty level, putting them at a disadvantage in accessing both medical and mental health care.

“According to the Surgeon’s General report, African-Americans are more likely to use primary care or emergency services than mental health specialists,” said Primm. Even those who seek professional help, “have high drop out rates and attend fewer sessions. The lack of cultural awareness, among physicians, leads to high rates of misdiagnosis, more side effects, and less adherence to treatment.”

To eliminate the stigma associated with mental health treatment, professionals recommend that Black colleges and universities collaborate across systems and departments to raise awareness.

“Counseling departments can’t take it on all by themselves. Issues like suicide, domestic violence and rape come up on different levels. Campus police, counselors, resident assistants and the dean of students all need to be on the same page and send the same messages,” said Dr. Angela Lee, a counselor at North Carolina Central University.

Recognizing that students may never visit the counseling office, Lee and her colleagues work with fraternities and other organizations as well as visit dormitories to permeate the campus with counseling information.

One program offers promise. A group of undergraduate students from the University of Virginia are promoting mental wellness through a peer-counseling organization called Project RISE, Resolving Issues through Support and Education. Geared toward Black students, peer counselors aim to create a positive atmosphere in which students can receive help, information and have someone to talk to about their problems.

“There were no peer-counseling groups in our school’s 100-plus year history, and many Black students on Uva.’s campus have had at least one experience with racial discrimination. African-American students were not using the psychological services on campus. We decided to give them another option,” said Gabrielle Hawkins, a fourth-year psychology major at the University of Virginia.

–Michelle J. Nealy

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