

Mental Health and the Black Church

*A Special Message from Lady Carla J. Debnam, MS, LCPC
Executive Program Director*

Mental Health and the Black Church is an oxymoron. The two do not usually go together. For years the Black Church has been the primary place of refuge for persons with mental health issues but has not sufficiently addressed those needs beyond the standard advice of 'pray about it'. The stigma associated with mental health issues is double the problem in the Black community as compared to the general population.

The Bible says that "My people perish for a lack of knowledge". This is especially true of Blacks and the issue of mental health. Our people are dying from Depression, Anxiety, Rage/Anger, Stress, Substance Abuse, Violence and other undiagnosed and untreated disorders. There is a direct correlation between our community's use of alcohol and drugs and the condition of our mental health. We are medicating our pain and discomfort caused by our psychological distress.

If diagnosed by a professional with a mental health disorder, we refuse to seek psychotherapy because do not want anyone to think we are 'crazy' or know our business. If we are prescribed medication to help alleviate the symptoms, we refuse to take the prescribed medications for fear of becoming addicted to it or because of the potential side effects. How many addicts do you know ask the dealer for the possible side effects of Heroin, Crack or Ecstasy? Yet we debate with the medical professionals about medications that have been through years of tests.

The facts are mounting up and the odds are against us. We are increasing in numbers in a few of the mental health diagnosis because of our lifestyles, our upbringing, our belief that we have to 'be strong' and that seeking help is a weakness or ungodly. What is most alarming is the death, violence and murder rate associated with untreated or undiagnosed mental disorders. The suicide rate and violent death rate is up for young black males. Even more recently a study reported an increase in suicide among preteen girls.

The saddest victims in our lack of access to proper mental health care are our children. Many of the diagnosis of behavioral problems the children have are directly related to their home life. The instability of the family has had a direct impact on the ability of our young people to cope and thrive during stressful times. Children are being diagnosed at younger ages with Bipolar Disorder, ADHD, ODD and other mental health related diagnoses. These are some of the challenges our community faces as it tries to come to grips with the impact mental health is having on our daily lives. So how can we, the Church, help those who are in our midst?

1. We can help by supporting persons who need treatment in their effort to get help. If someone comes to you for a meeting about an issue that has been ongoing and problematic for them, and you believe they need more assistance than you can

offer them, refer them to a medical or mental health professional that may be able to help them sort out their problem and give them the help they need. It helps to have a resource list of reliable professionals that you can use. Proverbs 11:14 states, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."

2. We can become agents of change by equipping people with the knowledge they need to make informed choices. The church is the first place that African Americans turn to for assistance in many areas of their lives. We need to be aware of the power we have and begin to empower others. We can begin to make mental health a priority in our ministries beginning with the children and with the older adults as well. Both of these populations are being affected with mental health challenges as can be seen by some of the school violence and the recent news stories with increased violence among senior citizens. Violence has its genesis in fear and loss – fear of embarrassment, fear of rejection, loss of self-respect and loss of control.
3. We can become 'a voice in the wilderness'. As John the Baptist cried out the challenge to repent, we need to cry out against the stigma of African Americans seeking treatment for mental health conditions. There have been many advances in therapy and medication so that a combination of the two can alleviate many of the challenges people face. Having an untreated disorder can be life threatening. If we do not begin to call attention to the need for seeking treatment and the benefits of accessing appropriate care, we will continue to see a rise in our membership of people with a variety of mental illnesses and the severity may increase.
4. We can continue to preach the Good News to all people. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus read these words from Isaiah "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." When we minister to those who are in our congregations we need to be sensitive to those suffering with mental health challenges in our sermons, bible study topics, small group sessions and in our conferences. You may not be able to address every issue but start with the ones you feel are affecting your congregation the most. Just getting the word out in layman's terms helps people spread the news of mental health and wellness. The topics don't have to be specific diagnosable conditions but more general topics – Overcoming Fear and Rejection, How to Get Through the Holidays When You've Lost a Loved One, Dealing with Separation/Divorce, Too Blessed to be Stressed, Powerful Parenting, Couples Communication.

As believers it seems as though our work is never done. But I believe God has equipped us spiritually and professionally to meet the needs of our Community. And he stands with us as we do His work!