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Fitness: It's not just for our bodies

by Vickie Evans-Nash
Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder
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Good mental health care is too often overlooked by Blacks

Matthea Little Smith is the African American Outreach Coordinator for National Association for Mental Illness (NAMI) of Minnesota. She began the job April 2008 by doing a needs assessment of the community, and it became apparent that there were no support, education or advocacy groups specific to African Americans. Her first charge became to address this issue.

She became interested in mental health as a young adult, but says, "What got me really, really passionate was when the folks came up here from the Gulf Coast [after Hurricane Katrina] and I directed the hurricane relief operations hub.

"The struggle became apparent," says Little Smith. "There were many very well-meaning providers that didn't have a clue as to how to work with Black folks from Louisiana."

Based on history, Little Smith says there's good reason for African Americans to be hesitant in trusting the medical field in general. "Things have change dramatically for people of color [in]...the mental health field," she says, "but that doesn't take away our skittishness."

As with physical health, Little Smith says that the most important thing for people to understand is that most mental illnesses brought about by stress are preventable. Eating well, exercising, and getting adequate rest can keep your brain as well as your body fit. Also like physical health, she says there are both mild and severe mental health issues.

"Unfortunately, if it's mild for us [African Americans], we decide it's not a problem, and then we push it until it's chronic," she says.

After visiting a psychiatrist, many African Americans will throw a prescription away, Little Smith says, labeling it as "White folks' stuff." Some may take the prescription, but only until they feel better.

After taking the prescription, patients may get frustrated when it doesn't prove to be a miracle cure. Though treatments do not always involve medication, those that do are often long-term, and unlike prescriptions for medical illnesses, doctors need patient feedback to determine whether they are effective.

Currently NAMI offers support groups in both North and South Minneapolis, and later this year they will be adding at least two in St. Paul. All groups are peer-to-peer, meaning those who are living with a psychiatric diagnosis are trained to facilitate the group.

Kwasi Nate Russell is one such peer-to-peer facilitator. Before he started recovery 13 years ago, he was battling chemical dependency. After reading Terrie Williams' book *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*, he realized that chemical dependency was just one of the issues he was dealing with.

"As soon as I read a part of that book, I had this huge rush of memory... I was able to look at all these parts in my life, and I was able to understand that...was depression working in my life." Russell was suffering from undiagnosed clinical depression.

After reading the book, he began to understand that he and his sisters, who are all in recovery now, used drugs and alcohol to deal with mental health issues brought on by post-traumatic stress. As a child, Russell and his siblings woke to find their mother murdered — after years of being a victim of domestic violence — at the hands of Russell's father, who suffering from alcoholism.

"This book...allowed me to forgive my father, because it showed me that he and his cohorts — all my uncles... — were actually suffering from depression, and that was their way of dealing with it, because they were caught up in Jim Crow segregation," says Russell. "We ended up being socialized in their sickness."

Russell and Darryl Streater participated in a 12-week program designed to support caregivers of people living with mental illness. In September of this year, they will facilitate a peer-to-peer 12-week course. "What it does is help people that actually have family members [with mental health issues] that are living with them, or may be institutionalized, our may be in and out of their lives," Russell says.

With mental health, just as with many professions, the face of the provider has a strong influence on acceptance by clients. Nationwide, Little Smith says, only two percent of mental healthcare providers are of color. In the Twin Cities, most of the African Americans in the mental health field are aides, not professionals.

However, medication and support groups alone are no more effective in treating mental health than in treating physical health issues. Although African American therapists are hard to come by in Minnesota, Thad Wilderson and Associates offers cultural competency therapy for African American, biracial and Latino patients.

Willie Winston has a Ph.D. in counseling psychology from the University of Minnesota and has been working for Thad Wilderson and Associates since 1997.

He is also president of the Minnesota Association of Black Psychologists.

Winston had originally planned to go into law enforcement, but while attempting to learn more about people and families he was led to a mental health career. He works mainly with youth.

Winston admits that looking for culturally specific resources for mental health issues can be a challenge. He often encourages the families he works with to seek out a Black psychiatrist, but says there are only about five or six in the state of Minnesota. Primary resources for those looking for a mental health provider include family members and friends.

"There is a stigma around mental health issues," Winston says, "So a lot of people don't want other people to know that they are dealing with, or they have a family member dealing with, mental health issues."

Other resources include a primary physician, but he strongly recommends the National Association of Black Social Workers, the Black Nurses Association, the Minnesota Black Physicians Association, and the Minnesota Association of Black Psychologists, which has been in existence since 1985. "I don't know if any of those [resources] get utilized to really impact what's going on in our community."

Are African Americans disproportionately impacted by mental health issues? Winston says, "I haven't done any studies, but I think stress definitely impacts our community more."

Winston believes that socio-economic, educational, and correctional system challenges, which all impact African Americans disproportionately, can also be general stressors for African Americans.

"Slavery had a terrible effect on us," Little Smith says, "and we haven't healed ourselves from that stress. And what they're finding out from Holocaust survivors is that stress stays in your body, and you can pass that stress on to your children."

"Often, I see kids who are under stress performing poorly in school," Winston says. "If the parents are

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under stress, oftentimes the children are under stress because they are looking at the parents.”

Little Smith explains that mental health issues often have physical health consequences, including obesity, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Winston, Little Smith and Russell all encourage African Americans to seek professional help for mental health issues. Russell calls for a community initiative, as described in Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu's book Solutions for Black America. “We need to have...community-based mental health healing centers,” Russell says.

For more information on NAMI of Minnesota African American support groups, contact Matthea Little Smith at 651-645-2948 ext. 108. Thad Wilderson and Associates is located at 475 University Avenue West, St. Paul. Their phone number is 651-225-8997. Vickie Evans-Nash welcomes reader response to vnash@spokesman-recorder.com.

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