

National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month

Fighting the Stigma of Mental Illness

By: Brother Leon Valentine



**Brother Kent Alford, Nursing Director for
Recovery Centers of America Capital**

The month of July is set aside for National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month! This observance, nationally declared in 2008, was created by Author & Mental Health Advocate Bebe Moore Campbell. The month-long observance is geared towards educating and enhancing public awareness surrounding the mental health crisis amongst Black Americans and people of color. It focuses on the racial disparities surrounding mental health and improving the education, resources & access to mental health treatments for black men and women.

Mental health conditions do not discriminate regardless of race, color, or gender. Anyone can experience the challenges surrounding mental health; however ethnic background, gender identity and economic background can make access to education & resources much more limited and difficult to find proper care and treatment to help treat mental illness.

We interviewed Brother Kent Alford, Nursing Director for Recovery Centers of America Capital Region, to speak on the topic surrounding mental health and the disadvantages and racial disparities Black people endure surrounding mental health, and as a man of Sigma, he is leading the charge to enhance public awareness surrounding mental health and Black men and women.

There is a common stereotype within the African American community that Black People Don't Go to Therapy. Within our culture, there is a stigma surrounding the acknowledgement and treatment options for those who suffer from mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and mental trauma. While there are services and treatment centers available on local, regional, and national level, Black people are the least advantaged when it comes to access of services. "Often times, I see other nationalities except for people of color who utilize outpatient services for mental health, and if so, it's primarily Black women. Unfortunately, many people of color don't have the access or medical benefits to cover the expense of treatment for mental health.

What is one disparity that Black people face when it comes to mental health and proper resources?

“One of the major disparities we face as an ethnicity when gaining efficient treatment is lack of insurance to treat the illness. Many people of color, often have medical insurance for dental or medical needs and is less common to be utilized for mental health services. Insurance for mental health services is not cheap. The average cost for services can range from between \$100 to \$200 per session, this excludes outpatient care, such as psychiatric consultations, therapy which can extend up to \$900 a week/biweek. Between rent, food and living expenses if they had to choose that over seeking treatment, daily living expenses would be considered first.”

Where does the challenge start when it comes to changing the stigma surrounding mental health & resources?

“I strongly believe the mental health advocacy starts at the school. With over twenty years in behavioral health, I have seen that schools which have predominantly white students are given more resources and tools to deal with issues of depression, anxiety, and manic illness. Black schools, however, are often disadvantaged based on economic area and lack of funding. When it comes to mental health resources at primarily Black schools, it often comes with handling crisis episodes and not as much resource for support.”

The challenge to end the stigma surrounding mental health

“I also serve as a Behavioral Health Chair for the DC Chapter of the NAACP. I’ve created an initiative where I visit Black barbershops and salons within the region to provide basic level therapy sessions and offer mental health resources for those who may not have the access of treatment. We have to provide better alternatives and resources to engage people of color to want to talk about mental health and get treatment outside of the traditional way of having to go sit in the traditional therapist office. Most therapist are not going to find themselves in a barber’s chair or salon to offer resources and support, however we have a hard time getting them to the officer and need to create programs to go to where our people are to have these conversations and get the help they need. To create barbershop and salons talk where I speak with Black men and women surrounding mental health and the mental health disparities we face as people of color.”

The stigma surrounding mental health is prevalent within the African-American community. Our own stigma creates a large disadvantage for us as a people when it comes to mental health. Throughout the past few years more discussion and resources have been provided for black people to open dialogue and start taking serious the importance of seeking treatment and erase the stigma of mental illness.