

Having your best life starts with a healthy mind

by Lynda Morris Parham, Ph.D.

A mind is a terrible thing to waste: Are you taking care of yours?

When most people think of having a healthy, productive, and successful life, their first thoughts are to eat right, exercise, work hard, and have good relationships. Rarely do people think that every area of life can be affected by having a healthy mind. Our mind is command central for our bodies; it determines our thoughts, mood and behaviors. When you neglect taking care of your mind and addressing mental health needs, you not only decrease your quality of life but you may be hurting the people around you.

A recent Surgeon General's report tells us that Blacks and Whites have similar rates of distress symptoms and mental illness with a few exceptions. However, Blacks with mental distress and illness are less likely than Whites to enjoy the same quality and productivity of life because they do not get the professional help that is available. Not only does the person with the problem suffer but he/she is more likely to become a burden to family and a liability at work.

How to tell if there is a problem

A healthy mind contributes to one's personal well-being, mental functions, physical health, productivity at work and capacity for recreation. It also is critical to satisfying relationships



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with family, friends and co-workers. The health status of the mind determines one's ability to handle the frustrations of change and the stress of hard times.

When you are suffering from the following problems, they need to be addressed: difficulties handling your day-to-day responsibilities (self-care, daily and work tasks, family or work relationships, or finances); problems with your thoughts, perceptions, memory, mood, or creativity; an inability to cope with a recent change or loss; or feelings of excessive sadness, worry and fear, anger outbursts and rage. Seeking help from a mental health professional for any of these issues mentioned might improve your overall quality of life.

Many Blacks experience their mental health problems as physical concerns such as headaches, backaches, stomach problems, or sexual difficulties. Consequently, they seek relief from a physician rather than from someone who specializes in mental health.

Why Blacks don't get help

One of the major reasons Blacks do not seek professional

help is the cost of services; some do not qualify for public coverage, many do not have jobs that offer private insurance, and it is very few who are able to pay out of pocket.

For those individuals with the courage to seek treatment, they often are unable to find African American clinicians.

The most significant factor that hinders Blacks from seeking treatment is our history of fear of the medical establishment. Also, we pride ourselves in being resilient and we often suffer in silence to demonstrate our strength.

To acknowledge that we are having difficulties handling our lives may be viewed as personal failure rather than an indication of emotional distress and mental illness that can be alleviated with counseling and/or medica-

tion.

What can I do

Learn more about your own mind-body connection and do a personal inventory of your mental/emotional strengths and weaknesses. If you are hesitant to seek help because talking to a stranger is not for you, then start with someone you are comfortable with. Ask a loved one to help you assess if there are areas where you could be functioning better. Talk with a pastor or your physician. Don't be afraid to be honest or get help.

A good mind is foundational to personal well-being, positive relationships, family success and economic prosperity.

Take care of your mind and it will take care of you.

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