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"Committed to improving the health of Black women and girls in California"





California Black Women's Health Project

*"Committed to improving the health of
Black women and girls in California"*

Issue Guide

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This ongoing series provides information on health policy issues that impact Black women. Additional information about this and other projects is available on CABWHP's website: www.cabwhp.org. This material may be reprinted only if it includes the following: Reprinted with the permission of the California Black Women's Health Project.

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Black Women: Eliminating The Stigma

"Black women define their households.... They've always taken care of everyone and everything that involves the family, the home and, many times, the finances. I can't be seen as weak in front of my husband, my brother or my daughter no matter what I'm going through inside."

- 27 year old Black woman

The shame, fear and ignorance, which still surround mental health problems, have no place in the 21st century. We must break down the attitudes that too often upset and disadvantage people at the very time when they need understanding and support.¹ We must stop: (1) trivializing mental health challenges as passing personality issues, (2) dismissing them as character weaknesses, (3) failing to acknowledge them at all.

"Stigma is not just a matter of using the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a person living with mental illness. Stigma is a barrier. Fear of stigma, and the resulting discrimination, discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need. An estimated 22 to 23 percent of the U.S. population experience a mental disorder in any given year, but almost half of these individuals do not seek treatment."² (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; U.S. Surgeon General, 2001.)

"To unload the baggage of our lives, we have to get help. But before we are ready to seek help, we first must get over the shame we experience from our "weaknesses," and overcome the other barriers that prevent us from visiting mental health providers or using resources...that address mental health concerns."³

There are some obvious, valid reasons that Black women aren't getting the help they need. "A lot of us didn't grow up knowing psychiatrists or psychologists or counselors, and we don't trust

¹ "Silent Treatment: Many Black Women Struggle With Depression on Their Own," *Race & Ethnicity in the New Urban America*, Columbia University © 2001.

² "See Me Campaign to End Stigma of Mental Illness," Scottish Executive News Online, August 10, 2002.

³ "Anti-Stigma: Do You Know The Facts?" SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center.

them because they're not familiar to us. It doesn't help that only two percent of America's psychologists are Black, and that law and mental health professionals have the power to lock us up. For too long, it wasn't unusual that such means were used to keep certain rebellious Black Americans in check.”⁴

In order to break down the walls of mistrust and eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health, it has been recommended that the following actions be taken:⁵

- End stigmatized portrayals of consumers, providers and caregivers in the media.
- Increase positive, informative reporting on mental health issues.
- Publicize what people should look for and what they should tell the doctor.
- Use the media's power as image-makers; media are crucial because of the stigma issue.
- Address cultural competence and apply culturally appropriate action throughout activities. Recognize and take account of cultural differences, including in the definitions of illness and stressors.
- Give help respectfully. Use positive communication: address protective as well as risk factors; address mental health issues as normal, everyday matters.

In addition, we must define mental health for ourselves. According to Dr. Marilyn Martin, several points cumulatively add up to define mental health.⁶

- Acceptance of Oneself
- The Ability to Manage Life's Challenges in the Least Harmful Manner
- The Capacity to Experience Joy and Pleasure
- The Ability to Tell the Difference between What is and What is not Under Control
- Coming to Terms with Things Not Under Your Control
- Successful Grieving
- Facing the Truth
- Learning to Deal with the Past
- Knowing How to Interact with Other People in Ways that are Gratifying to Both Parties
- Ongoing Self-Care

Policy Summit 2003: Recommendations for Action

At our third annual Policy Summit on February 7, 2003 in Sacramento, we addressed the intersection between race, gender and mental and physical health via advocacy and policy. Policy Summit attendees participated in working groups that were charged with brainstorming about policy ideas to improve the mental and physical health of Black women.

One working group addressed the issue of how to eliminate the stigma connected to mental health.

⁴ Martin, Marilyn, Saving Our Last Nerve: The Black Women's Path to Mental Health, p.9, © 2002 Hilton Publishing Company.

⁵ Ibid at 17.

⁶ “*Summary of Breakout Group Discussion Concerning Mental Health and Mental Disorders*,” Healthy People Consortium Meeting, “Implementing Healthy People 2010,” November 11, 2000.

⁷ Saving Our Last Nerve, pp. 12-15.

Policy Idea

Create and disseminate “The 12 Commandments of Good Mental Health”

Goal

To outline the parameters for mental and emotional well-being in user-friendly, Black women focused manner

Rationale

To eliminate the stigma associated with the issues of mental and emotional health, we must create an engaging public education campaign that heightens Black women’s awareness and understanding of mental and emotional health.

Policy Discussion

The ideas expressed by Policy Summit participants about this policy idea included those listed below.

1. *What are the important components of the program?*

• The 12 Commandments of Good Mental Health:

1. Mental Health Is A Sense of Your Well-Being
2. Self Care Is Not Selfish- Take Care of You So You Can Take Care of Others
3. It Is Okay To Break Cycles- This Too Shall Pass
4. Recognize Something Is Wrong- You Deserve To Feel Well
5. Ask For Help, It Is Not A Secret, It Is Okay To Tell Someone You Trust
6. Set Boundaries, Walk Away, Just Say No and Go Underground
7. Mental Health Affects Physical Well-Being: Breath Deep And Take The Meds Because Medication is Okay
8. Acknowledge Your Feelings and Assaults Immediately Then Forgive & Remember
9. Chronicle Your Monthly Cycles and Moods — Symptomatic Signs Help You Recognize Depression
10. Your Environment is Not You. Nurture and Protect Your Spirit
11. Work Through the Pain, Trust the Process, and Get Out of Bed
12. Plan Your Personal Fun and Use a Pen!

• Dissemination and utilization of the 12 Commandments of Good Mental Health

- Integrate services for healthier families
- Social marketing for broad exposure through all media outlets
- Printed materials
- Slogans
- Songs (“12 Days of Wellness”)
- Sermons
- Dances

If you are interested in providing input on these issues or participating in our Black Women’s Mental Health Initiative, please contact Crystal Crawford at 310-412-1828 x15 or crystal@cabwhp.org.



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