

Church vs Counseling: It's A Black Thing and I Want You to Understand

Linda J. M. Holloway*

Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Psychology and Counseling, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Alabama, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Linda J. M. Holloway, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Psychology and Counseling, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Alabama, USA.

Received: April 29, 2017; **Published:** May 23, 2017

Abstract

This article examines why Black Americans are more comfortable seeking help from churches, family, and friends rather than professional counselors. The author will identify many reasons why Black Americans report they are not willing to go to counseling. It is certainly not because Black Americans experience less emotional and mental problems. Black people, culturally speaking, gravitate towards what is familiar and comfortable within their communities. Professional counseling has often been viewed as a White middle class resource. Black Americans throughout history have viewed church as a place of refuge. Black churches played a significant role in the black communities during the civil rights movement. Pastors, ministers, deacons, mothers of the church, and ushers within the Black church have been those individuals who would lend a listening ear to the wounded heart and downtrodden within the black community.

Keywords: *Black Americans; African-Americans; Churches; Counseling and Professional Therapy*

Introduction

Mental Health issues, historically in the Black community, go underdiagnosed and mistreated. There are approximately 45.7 Black Americans in the United States, comprising 13.2% of the population. The Black American breakdown by regions are: South - 55% - Midwest - 18%, Northeast - 17% and West - 10% according to the 2014 U.S. Census Bureau. Black Americans are 20% more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population. Mental health is said to be linked to one's socioeconomic status. Black Americans are products of a racist oppressive society born out of slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow Laws. Today, Blacks socioeconomic disparities stem from being systematically excluded from education, health care, social and economic resources. People who suffer from poverty, homelessness, incarceration and substance abuse problems are at more risk for mental health issues than those that are not.

Despite the progress that has transpired over the years, Black Americans are still faced with many facets of racism within their communities.

According to the United States Health and Human Services - Office of Minority Health (2016) [1]

- Black adults are 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress than White adults.
- Black adults who live below the poverty line are three times more likely to report serious psychological distress than those who reside above the poverty lines.
- Black adults are more likely to report feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness than White adults.

Citation: Linda J. M. Holloway. "Church vs Counseling: It's A Black Thing and I Want You to Understand". *EC Psychology and Psychiatry* 3.5 (2017): 165-172.

- Black adults are less likely than Whites to die from suicide as teenagers; however, Black teenagers are more likely to attempt suicide than are White teenagers (8.3% vs. 6.2%).
- Blacks are twice more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to be diagnosed with Schizophrenia [2].

Treatment Challenges

- Blacks are systematically overrepresented in jails and prisons. People of color make up 60% of the prison population. 37% of drug arrests are Black Americans but only 14% are reported as drug users (illicit drugs are frequently associated with self-medication among people with mental illness) – (American Progress Race and News, 2013).
- Black Americans are overly concerned with health care providers not being culturally competent to meet their needs. Less than 2% of American Psychological Association members are Black Americans. Blacks report that they have experienced some racism in the form of microaggressions while seeking help from their therapist.
- Black Americans seeking treatment for mental health illness for mild depression or anxiety are viewed within their social circles as “crazy”. They do not feel that they can discuss their mental health issues openly and honestly with family members. Blacks having the support of their family can pay huge dividends in obtaining the mental health support they need. Blacks who do not have family support often feel alone and alienated.

Access to Mental Health

- The Affordable Care Act alleviated the gap between uninsured individuals. 15.9% of Black Americans versus 11.1% of White Americans were still uninsured in 2014 [3].
- The percentage of people who were unable to obtain or who were delayed in getting much needed medical care or prescription medicines were significantly higher for people with health insurance in 2012 [3].
- Of the adult Black Americans with major depression, only 54.3% received help compared to 73.1% adult White Americans in 2011 [4].
- 40.6% of Black Americans who are age 12 and over were treated for substance abuse and completed their treatment course compared to 45.3% of White Americans [4].

Black Americans, regardless of their age, are more likely to be victims of serious violent crimes than are non-Hispanic Whites, making them more likely to meet the diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Blacks Americans are also twice as likely as non-Hispanic Whites to be diagnosed with Schizophrenia. Ward, Wilstire, Detry, and Brown [5] reported that Blacks belief systems and perceptions toward mental illness greatly influence their coping behaviors. The participants of the study were not very open about admitting to if they were suffering from psychological problems; however, they stated they would be somewhat open to seeking mental health services. Interestingly, several participants suggested they would be willing to seek other forms of services to cope with their problems. Overall, the Blacks in the study were overly concerned about the stigma of mental health. The researchers recommended it would be a good idea to expose the participants to factual literature concerning mental illness. Hopefully, this would help alter their mindset about mental illness and they would feel more comfortable about seeking professional counseling.

Mental illness in the Black community is highly stigmatized [6]. When a person mentions they are feeling a little down and need to speak to someone, that conversation is often met with “you better pray about it, and see what God has to say”. Religion is given a great deal of credence among the Black community. According to the 2014 Pew Research Center, nearly half of Black people attend church at least once a week. People in the Black community are encouraged to go to the Lord and pray about their life challenges. The church has

and continues to play a significant role in the Black community. The church was where a lot of grassroots movements started in the Black community. Faith-based organizations have grown by leaps and bounds over the years amongst the Black community. Overall, Black people are more likely to put their trust, hope, and faith into the church. The church is a place of refuge and often has been quoted as "Sunday Morning's Group Therapy". Black people from all socio-economic backgrounds can feel free to scream, shout, and release their emotions and not feel judged. The church has become that safe place in the Black community where everyone is welcomed and treated equally. Degrees and titles are left at the door. Church is a warm, welcoming, nurturing, and nondiscriminatory place where everyone can leave their prayers, worries, and concerns at the altar. There are several quotes that are often said by members of the Black churches when members are going through tough times.

- God is not going to put no more on you then you can bear.
- Trust in the Lord and He will see you through.
- You have to learn how to depend on the Lord.
- What God has done for others, He will do for you.
- Be still and wait on the Lord; He knows what he is doing.
- God has a plan for you.
- Take all your burdens to the Lord in prayer.
- God did not bring you this far to leave you.
- What God meant to be, will be.
- God is only trying to teach you a lesson.
- Do not question God.
- God closes one door to open another.
- God will never leave or forsake you.
- Trust God with all your heart.
- God is building your faith muscles.

As a member of the Black community and a strong believer in my Christian faith, I do not make light of these sayings. These are sayings that can be found in the scriptures but they also are interwoven into the gospel songs sung the Black church/community. These songs are messages to the Black community. They sing them bellowing from the top of their lungs and deep within their souls on how the Lord will see them through. "God will make a way out of no way; leaning and depending on the everlasting arms of Jesus". Many of today's Black spiritual songs were sung by slaves. These songs serve as a form of therapy for Black Americans as they spoke to their journey "Oh How My Soul Looks Back and Wonders How I made it over". Testimonies are used by Blacks to tell how God has brought them through hard times when they were at an all-time low. These included sayings such as: it seemed like there was no way out with 'their backs against the wall and the wall against their backs'. Testifying is a technique one will discover within Black churches where people tell their stories of life lows and highs to encourage those around them that God will bring peace, comfort, hope, and joy in the mist of their trials and tribulations; but, you must continue to put your trust in God. The underlying message is that if God did it for them, then God will do it for me. These beliefs and practices keep the Black community seeking and attending church weekly. Church provides comfort and solitude for the pain and anguish they encounter in their daily lives. Black Americans see counseling as something for White people. There are numerous misconceptions regarding professional counseling in the Black community. Many Blacks view professional counseling as a resource for people who are weak and those who are crazy.

Black women are said to be strong willed. They can carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Black women are often referred to as the "Strong Black Woman". She is also viewed as a "Super Woman"; one who takes care of everybody else's needs - her husband and his family, the children, her family, church family, and the people in the community. This leaves very little time for her own needs to be satisfied. When a Black woman encounters bouts of depression, anxiety, and emotional breakdowns, she often says to herself, "I just need a little rest and relaxation and then I can keep on going." If she chooses to confide in her friends and family about how she is really feeling worn out, down and depressed, she is often told, "Girl, you got it made, I do not understand what you are whining about, there is nothing wrong with you, when was the last time you been to church and gave God some of your time?"

When Black women do build up the courage to share their truths about struggling with everyday blues and feeling down in the dumps, they are quick to be reminded of their history of slavery, cotton fields, share cropping, Jim Crow Laws, segregation, cotton on their back, hoeing and chopping, having to plant potatoes, pick cotton, having to walk for miles to the grocery store, having no shoes or clothes to wear, fire hoses, being bitten by dogs, marching all the way from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Alabama, and sitting on the back of the bus. So, what do you have to feel down about? Why are you sad? You do not have time to be depressed, get over it, and drive on. Where are your bounce back muscles? She is also told this phrase is a, "You are going through a rough patch, give it time and you will be okay". Often, the Black woman is not encouraged to seek professional counseling. After a Black woman receives and digests these types of sermons, she starts to feel guilty about how she is feeling. Her mind begins to reflect on the past altruistic Black women's experience during slavery - having their babies snatched out of their arms, ripped from their bellies, husbands and children sold at auctions never to be seen again, that perhaps there is really nothing ailing her. If these Black women were able to push through these sources of psychological dehumanizing trauma, surely I ought to be able to handle the daily pressures I am currently experiencing. So then, the Black woman sucks it up and drives on as if she is not hurting. This is because the Black woman's space does not give her permission to adequately express her pains and sorrows.

Having witnessed and heard many of these same comments in my own brokenness, I can identify how Black women are made to feel when they are told that they are not supposed to feel sad, and if you do, you cannot own your pain. You hear you are a strong Black woman and strong Black women do not get depressed, do not feel sorrowful and wallow in their pain because that is not a part of their DNA. More than likely, she will turn to counterproductive measures to cope with her stresses of life (i.e., overeating, undereating, alcohol, drugs, sex, over spending, becoming a workaholic, etc.). Doing these things simply exacerbates the depression and anxiety that one is currently experiencing. What you cannot express, you will repress, and what you repress you will express. So, many Black women are left to suffering in silence.

Black men's ego and sense of pride often will not allow them to seek the professional mental health they need. Men in general are supposed to be strong; they are often expected to be the providers, priests, and protector of their families. When a man's idea of who he thinks he is supposed to be does not measure up to the gender role expectations he has for himself, this weighs heavily on his male identity. Black men, who are challenged by many of the social ills of society, as result of living in an oppressive and racist society are likely to be unemployed or underemployed. This places them at a high risk of not being able to provide for themselves or their family adequately. Instead of seeking professional help, Black men weep in the dark. Normally, men are not like women when it comes to expressing their emotional concerns. Whereas a woman might be more prone to share her emotional concerns with another woman, men will keep their feelings bottled up inside. Black men who are not willing to express their life frustrations may be lead down the path of self-destructive behaviors such as drinking, drugs, overworking, or gambling. Thus, when people are not able to obtain the proper mental health, it creates all kinds of health issues in their lives. Men who are under a great deal of stress can be subject to health issues like high blood pressure and heart attacks. Children in the Black community will observe how their parents cope with stress, anxiety, and depression. As they watch these dynamics transpire, they become socialized to take on the same methodology. The cycle is perpetuated and the Black community continues the unhealthy cycle of not seeking professional counseling for their mental illness(es).

Reasons Why Blacks Refuse to Seek Professional Counseling

- The stigma attached that therapy is what "White" people do. Black people pray.
- Many Blacks see counseling for people who are weak, who cannot solve their own problems or people they consider crazy [7].
- They consider their family as their support system. They are the people who will be there for you no matter what you are going through in your life.
- Black families are taught that what happens in their home, stays in their home. It is not to be discussed with outsiders.
- Affordability – Many Blacks cannot afford to pay for professional counseling due to lack of health care coverage. What money they do have is spent on basic living expenses; therefore, mental health issues often go unsolved.
- Lack of knowledge - Many Blacks do not understand what mental illness is and how it can be treated [8].
- Cultural Mistrust – Blacks mistrust in the medical field dates back several generations to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment during 1932-1972, which resulted in hundreds of perfectly healthy young Black men dying from untreated injected syphilis. Their families were devastated as wives were unknowingly infected with the disease and children were being born with congenital syphilis. This massive human rights failure could have been avoided if those men who were infected were not grossly manipulated and lied to by the United States Public Health Services. John Heller, the Director of Public Health Services' Division of Venereal Disease, was quoted as having said "doctors and civil servants simply did their jobs. Some merely followed orders, others worked for the glory of science." This, among other medical scenarios, has left Blacks extremely suspicious of the medical field.
- Blacks are least likely to encounter a Black Psychologist or Mental Health Provider. Many would like to seek help from someone with a similar background [9].
- Confidentiality - Black Americans are concerned that the information they share with their therapist will be used against them. They may confide something to their therapist that might be viewed as unethical. Blacks do not want their therapist to report them because they could lose their jobs. Blacks really want to know how much of what they say in therapy will be confidential or later used against them.
- Cultural Competency- Black Americans prefer to seek help from someone who looks like them and who has experienced life through their pair of lenses. The Black clients do not want to be made to feel like he or she has to educate their therapist [10].
- Blacks have reported they have experienced some form of racism and cultural insensitivity as result of counseling. As a result, they often terminate their counseling sessions prematurely and refuse to return for any additional counseling (Snowden., *et al.* 2009).
- Spirituality – Many Black people rely on their faith to get them through tough times. The term "Just pray about it" is readily used throughout the Black community. Blacks do not want therapy to replace their trust in God [11,12].

Empowering Blacks to Move Forward and Professional Counseling

To help Blacks become more comfortable comfortable with professional counseling, the following are a list of measures which should be implemented.

- Locate a culturally competent therapist
- Develop a clear understanding about what professional counseling is and what a person should expect when they attend counseling
- Explain that going to therapy does not mean you are not a Christian or you do not have faith in God
- Provide better access to mental health
- Conduct workshops and seminars on mental issues in the Black community
- Engage Black community leaders in mental health awareness processes, so they can encourage members of the Black community to seek the professional health they need
- During mental health awareness month, create programs specifically designed for the Black community
- Train more Black therapists
- Ensure adequate multicultural training is provided for non-Whites
- Ensure counseling sessions are culturally appropriate
- Have people with similar ethnic and racial backgrounds to speak the Black community concerning mental illness
- Illustrate how spirituality and counseling can co-exist
- Provide counseling 101 for the local Black churches, so that they are better able to assist people with getting the professional help they desired
- Establish trust among the Black community with the medical health profession.

Summary and Conclusion

Black American, like all other groups, suffer from mental illness(es). However, they are the least likely to seek mental health counseling due to its stigma in the Black community. Many Blacks believe if you go to counseling that you are weak, do not trust that God will take care of your problems, or you are crazy. Organizing and implementing local workshops and seminars on mental illness will help to break down the stigma many Blacks have concerning mental illness thereby making it more likely for them to seek the help they need. The poem “We Wear the Mask” by Laurence Dunbar has been provided because I believe it is a clear depiction of Black life and how they cope with mental illness by wearing a mask.

We Wear the Mask
By PUAL LAURENCE DUNBAR

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise?
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Black Americans no longer have to smile, grin and pretend everything is okay when deep inside they are broken. It is time Black Americans seek and obtain the assistance they need without feeling like they will not be treated appropriately or made fun of by friends and family. It is a time to sound the alarm and to shed light and break the silence on mental illness in the Black community. Many Black Americans are suffering in silence and Feels like they do not have a place to share their pain. Black people no longer have to be ashamed of having a mental illness such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD. I strongly believe that if many Blacks felt had a safe place to express their challenges in life, then they would seek professional counseling. The stigma of mental illness must first be eradicated in the Black community. This can take place by allowing the Black community to understand that people who seek professional counseling are not weak and have not turned their backs on God. We will then start to see people getting in touch with their truths, which allows for the burdens and shackles that have been weighing them down to be released. Therapy is not bad, but it is bad when you are hurting and afraid to seek the help you need. Mental illness, when left untreated, will not only destroy the person, but also those around them. Mental Illness is a Black thing and I do want you to understand the effect it has on the Black community.

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

Recommended Resources

Brochures

- Depression and African Americans: Not Just the Blues
- What is Bipolar Disorder? A Guide to Hope and Recovery for African Americans

Fact Sheets

- Bipolar Disorder and African Americans
- Clinical Depression and African Americans

Partnerships and Resources

- Capstone Institute for Research on Education of Students Placed at Risk, Howard University: <http://www.capestoneinstitute.org/>
- National Black Nurses Association: <http://www.nbna.org/>
- National Medical Association: <http://www.nmanet.org/>
- Lee Thompson Young Foundation: <http://www.leethompsonyoungfoundation.org/>
- National Association of Black Social Workers-(202) 678-4570
- The Association of Black Psychologists: <http://www.abpsi.org>
- Black Psychiatric of America- (855) 435-5077
- African American Marriage Counselors
- The National Alliance of Mental Health: <http://nami.org/>
- [Http://diorvargas.com/poc-mental-illness](http://diorvargas.com/poc-mental-illness)

Recommended Readings

- Allen A A and Gordon S. "Creating a framework for change". (Eds) R. L. Meth and R. S. Pasick. *Men in Therapy: The Challenge of Change*. The Guilford Press: New York. (1990): 131 -151.
- Carter JH. "Providing clinical services for the unserved and underserved populations: The Black patient". *The Psychiatric Forum* (1984): 32 -37.
- Carzenave NA. "Black men in America: The quest for "manhood". (Ed.) H. P. McAdoo *Black Families*. Sage Publications: Beverly Hills (1981): 176-185.
- DeGruy J. "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome". Portland, Oregon Joy DeGruy Publications Inc (2005).
- Franklin AJ. "Therapy with African- American men". *Families in Society* 73 (1992): 350-355.
- Hillard AG. "A framework for focused counseling on the African-American man". *Journal of Non-White Concerns* (1985): 72-77.
- Hobbs SR. "Issues in psychotherapy with Black male adolescents in the inner city: A Black clinician's perspective". *Journal of Non-White Concerns* (1985): 79-87.
- Jones AC. "Psychological functioning in Black Americans: A conceptual guide for use in psychotherapy". *Psychotherapy* 22.2 (1985): 363-369.
- Poussaint AF and Alexander A. "Lay My Burden Down". Boston, Massachusetts Bacon Press (2000).
- Williams TM. "Black Pain". New York, New York Scribner (2008).

Bibliography

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Mental Health. "Mental health and African Americans" (2016).
2. American Psychological Association. "African Americans have limited access to mental and behavioral health care" (2016).
3. Agency for Health Research and Quality. "National healthcare quality and disparities report" (2014).
4. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. "National healthcare disparities report" (2013).
5. Ward EC., *et al.* "African American men and women's attitude toward mental illness, perception of stigma, and preferred coping behaviors". *Nursing Research* 62.3 (2013): 185-194.
6. Alvidrez J., *et al.* "The Experience of Stigma among Black Mental Health Consumers". *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 19.3 (2008): 874-893.
7. Williams MT. "How therapists drive away minority clients". *Psychology Today* (2013).
8. Thompson VL., *et al.* "African American's perception of psychotherapy and psychotherapists". *Professional Psychological Research and Practice* 35.1 (2004): 19-26.
9. Williams MT. "Why African Americans avoid psychotherapy". *Psychology Today* (2011).
10. American Psychological Association. "Demographic characteristics of APA members by membership characteristics" (2014).
11. Suite DH., *et al.* "Beyond misdiagnosis, misunderstanding and mistrust: relevance of the historical perspective in the medical and mental health treatment of people of color". *Journal of the National Medical Association* 99.8 (2007): 879-885.
12. United State Census Bureau. Quick fact (2014).

Volume 3 Issue 5 May 2017

©All rights reserved by Linda J. M. Holloway.

Citation: Linda J. M. Holloway. "Church vs Counseling: It's A Black Thing and I Want You to Understand". *EC Psychology and Psychiatry* 3.5 (2017): 165-172.