African American communities across the United States are more culturally diverse now than in any other time in history, with increasing numbers of immigrants from African nations, the Caribbean, Central America and other countries. To ensure African American communities have access to adequate and affordable care, a better understanding of the complex role that cultural backgrounds and diverse experiences play in mental disorders in these communities is vital.

Cultural Issues

Culture—a combination of common heritage beliefs, values, and rituals—is an important aspect of racial and ethnic communities.

African Americans are a resilient people who have withstood enslavement and discrimination to lead productive lives and build vibrant communities. Throughout U.S. history, the African American community has faced inequities in accessing education, employment, and health care. However, strong social, religious, and family connections have helped many African Americans overcome adversity and maintain optimal mental health.

Many Americans, including African Americans, underestimate the impact of mental disorders. Many believe symptoms of mental illnesses, such as depression, are “just the blues.” Issues of distrust in the health care system and mental illness stigma frequently lead African Americans to initially seek mental health support from non-medical sources.

Often, African Americans turn to family, church and community to cope. The level of religious commitment among African Americans is high. In one study, approximately 85 percent of African Americans respondents described themselves as “fairly religious” or “religious” and prayer was among the most common way of coping with stress.

Because African Americans often turn to community—family, friends, neighbors, community groups and religious leaders—for help, the opportunity exists for community health services to collaborate with local churches and community groups to provide mental health care and education to families and individuals.

Studies have shown that family participation in a support group or a church group can improve the family’s ability to care for family members with mental disorders and cope with the emotional distress of being a caregiver.

Rates of Mental Disorders

Rates of mental illnesses in African American communities are similar to those of the general population. Most individuals are able to maintain good mental health. However, many are in desperate need of mental health treatment. Culturally diverse groups often bear a disproportionately high burden of disability resulting from mental disorders. This disparity does not stem from a greater prevalence rate or severity of illness in African Americans, but from a lack of culturally competent care, and receiving less or poor quality care.

For some disorders, such as schizophrenia and mood disorders, there is a high probability of misdiagnosis because of differences in how African Americans express symptoms of emotional distress. And while the rate of substance use among African American is lower than other ethnicities, alcohol and drugs are responsible for more deaths in the African American community than any other chronic disease in the U.S.

Conclusion

Cultural identity encompasses distinct patterns of belief and practices that have implications for one’s willingness to seek treatment from and to be adequately served by mental health care providers. More research must be done to better understand mental health disparities and to develop culturally competent interventions for African Americans. With proper diagnosis and treatment, African Americans—like other populations—can increasingly better manage their mental health and lead healthy, productive lives.
One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigma associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.HealthyMinds.org.

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Resources

For more information, please contact:

American Psychiatric Association (APA)
1000 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
703-907-7300
www.healthyminds.org

Mental Health America (MHA)
2000 N. Beauregard Street
6th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
800-969-NMHA (6642)
www.nmha.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201
703-524-7600
www.nami.org

Black Psychiatrists of America (BPA)
2020 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW,
Suite 725
Washington, DC 20006
www.blackpsych.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
1 Choke Cherry Road
Rockville, MD 20850
240-276-2000
www.samhsa.gov

Mental Health America
(www.healthyminds.org)

Ordering Information

Brochures may be ordered by visiting www.appi.org or calling 800-368-5777. The brochures are sold by topic in packets of 50. Discount pricing is available for bulk quantities of five or more packets. Please email bulksales@psych.org for more information. APA physician members receive a 10% discount.

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