

The 2023 Carl C. Bell Memorial Award Winning Essay

By Donovan Hopkins

Mental health, to me, is an essential aspect of overall well-being. It encompasses our emotional, psychological, and social well-being and affects how we think, feel, and act. It also plays a crucial role in how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Similarly, my peers and my community value mental health as a critical part of our lives that significantly impacts our ability to function effectively in daily tasks. Regrettably, societal factors such as healthcare inequity, community violence, post-pandemic anxiety, isolation, and racial injustice can and have significantly affected mental health. It's vital to address these issues to improve mental health awareness and support in my community and beyond.

Healthcare inequity, particularly, has been a longstanding barrier to achieving optimal mental health. As a black male living in an underserved community, I've witnessed firsthand how disparities in access and quality of mental health services exacerbate mental health outcomes. The complex interplay of economic, social, and racial factors creates a chasm between need and service utilization (Cook, 2006). Many individuals grappling with mental health issues often face a double jeopardy: stigmatization and lack of resources, making their symptoms unrecognized, undiagnosed, or untreated. Community violence also leaves indelible marks on mental health. Violence, as the World Health Organization (2002) suggests, can lead to a cascade of psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. It's particularly stark in communities like mine, where the reality of violence becomes a distressing part of everyday life. Unquestionably, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these pre-existing mental health stressors. The fear and uncertainty surrounding the virus, amplified by isolation from social distancing measures, have magnified the mental health crisis (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

My peers and I have experienced this heightened state of anxiety, a stark reminder of the pandemic's effects on our mental well-being. The undercurrent of these societal factors is often racial injustice, which, from my experience, plays a powerful role in mental health. Systemic racism can contribute to chronic stress, heightening the risk for various mental health disorders (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). I believe addressing racial disparities is pivotal to improving mental health outcomes, particularly within minority communities. All these factors demonstrate how societal issues can significantly influence mental health. In light of this, it becomes evident that addressing mental health means not only providing support services but also working to mitigate the societal factors contributing to mental health problems. I believe in taking active steps to raise awareness about mental health and break down the barriers to accessing mental health services.

This belief drove me to become certified in Teen Mental Health First Aid through the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. It was my way of equipping myself with the knowledge and skills to support those around me who might be struggling with mental health issues. In all, mental health is not an isolated aspect of our lives. It is intertwined with societal issues and requires a comprehensive approach that addresses these contributing factors. As we navigate this complex landscape, let us remember that the dialogue about mental health is always evolving. And each of us has a role to play in ensuring that this evolution leads us toward a society that values and prioritizes mental health, providing everyone with the support they need.

References:

Cook, B. L. (2006). Racial-ethnic disparities in access to mental health care. *Medical Care Research and Review*.

Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. S. (2020). Mental Health and the Covid-19 Pandemic. *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Williams, D. R., & Williams-Morris, R. (2000). Racism and Mental Health: The African American Experience. *Ethnicity & Health*.

World Health Organization. (2002). *World Report on Violence and Health*