



3rd annual Black Mental Health Summit to address stigma, bias and barriers to care

The free NAMI Keystone Pa. event returns to Wilkesburg with a roster of experts



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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JUN 29, 2024

5:30 AM

Mariah Jones vividly recalls family vacations, but not for memories made at the beach or by a pool. Instead of relaxing, she found herself unable to walk barefoot, sit in hotel room chairs or lie in bed out of discomfort. It wasn't until years later that the Whitehall native was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder and placed on medication.

That long-delayed diagnosis for Jones, now 21, is unfortunately common among Black Americans, and it highlights the importance of comprehensive, culturally sensitive mental health care.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that [1 in 5 adults](#) has a mental disorder, while less than half receive treatment. For Black adults, fewer than 40% receive treatment, a disparity many experts link, at least in part, to stigma within the Black community, cultural influences and social determinants of health.

“I’ve seen the stigmas in other communities as well, but I hear it internalized,” said Piper Carroll, a psychiatrist at UPMC Center for Eating Disorders. “I’ve heard Black psychiatrists say that Black people don’t get eating disorders, I’ve heard parents of Black children and adolescents saying that they didn’t realize this could happen to their child, and I’ve also seen Black people say to themselves that they didn’t realize they could have an eating disorder.”

To tackle stigma and continue the conversation, NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania, part of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is holding its third annual Black Mental Health Summit on July 10 at Hosanna House in Wilkinsburg. Tagged to National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month, the conference features keynote speakers, networking and educational opportunities. Attendees can expect to have conversations about healing from trauma, as well as discuss ways to overcome barriers to receiving mental health care in Pittsburgh.

[Author and activist Leon Ford](#), a Pittsburgher who was paralyzed at age 19 after being shot by a local police officer during a traffic stop, is among the speakers.

Aleta Barnett, director of mental health equity community engagement at NAMI Keystone, said she is looking forward to the speakers’ messages of healing, and she hopes it inspires attendees to start their own journeys.



Mariah Jones, then in her late teens, listens as her mother Chawning Jones speaks in their Whitehall home, in 2021.

(Alexandra Wimley/Post-Gazette)

In addition to the summit, Barnett noted that NAMI fosters other environments for mental health discussions, including support groups for spouses, families and individuals.

Often, a combination of stigmas, insurance and lack of transportation can defer Black individuals from seeking mental health treatment until they are in crisis.

From 2018 to 2020, rates of mental health-related emergency department visits were highest among Black adults, per the CDC. Among these visits, specific mental health disorders — related to substance use, anxiety and mood — were most prevalent among Black adults. Additionally, Black adults experienced longer wait times in the ED compared to their white counterparts.

“There has definitely been a rise of all different kinds of mental health diagnoses in [Black] communities,” said Carroll. “There is some suggestion to believe that a lot of this is due to trauma from exposure to racism and discrimination that is very ubiquitous and prevalent throughout our society right now.”

Due to an ongoing shortage of mental health providers, Carroll said that scheduling an appointment with a therapist or psychiatrist is difficult, a problem exacerbated for many by the lack of diversity among mental health professionals.

“One of the things that we know is true is that a lot of people like to have a therapist that looks like them and can relate to their experiences, and there really is a shortage of diverse therapists,” said Valerie McNicholl, a licensed clinical social worker at Move Forward Counseling in Pittsburgh.

“There are definitely things that white therapists can do to make sure that they have a culturally competent skill set, but still, there are limitations to that,” she said.

That was true for Jones, who tried out three therapists until she found a good fit. Looking for someone she could connect with in addition to receiving the care she needed, Jones said her first therapist was a white man, whom she felt could not understand her experiences.

In addition to her OCD, Jones said she developed an eating disorder during her freshman year at Vassar College. She remembers feeling “invalidated,” particularly in terms of expectations of those with eating disorders. Many judged her struggles by physical appearance alone — “You don’t look like you have an eating disorder” — rather than her behavior, including restricted food intake.

Even with diverse providers, Carroll said that bias exists in everyone, which creates another barrier to care. Per the [American Psychiatric Association](#), Black individuals are misdiagnosed at a higher rate with schizophrenia and also are less likely to be offered antidepressant therapy.



Aleta Barnett, director of mental health equity community engagement at NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania, leads a discussion during last year's Black Mental Health Summit.
(Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette)

Mental health professionals should work to become aware of this bias and conduct complete mental health screenings for all patients, suggested Carroll.

In an effort to remove the barrier to finding an appropriate therapist, NAMI developed an [African American mental health resources guide for Allegheny County](#), which lists Black therapists, psychiatrists and programs.

After the summit, McNicholl plans to bring back information to her colleagues at Move Forward Counseling.

“The more we can talk about how mental health affects different populations of people differently, the better treatment people are going to be able to have,” she said.

To attend: The summit is free and open to the public, but organizers suggest those interested [register online](#) by July 5.

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First Published: June 29, 2024, 5:30 a.m.

Updated: June 29, 2024, 7:46 p.m.

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