MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Why Black Dad's Positive Mental Health Is Good for Youth Academic Outcomes

FATHERS INCORPORATED ™

Moynihan Institute
FOR FATHERHOOD RESEARCH AND POLICY

codeblue

ISSUE BRIEF 1.2

Mental health has long been stigmatized in society.

This has especially been true for men, in general, and Black men, in particular. There has been a stigma attached to mental health challenges with descriptors like "toxic masculinity," "being crazy," "touchy-feely," or "overly emotional." Men have been encouraged to either address their mental well-being or "man up" and "keep quiet" about them. Likewise, in the Black community, mental health has been stigmatized. It has traditionally been seen as something that can be "prayed away" or simply dismissed. Due to these and other negative connotations, raising awareness around mental health for Black men has been doubly challenging but all the more important.

THE MEN'S DEN

INITIATIVE

is designed to provide a **safe space** FOR MEN to identify and address **MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES**

Fathers Incorporated (FI), based in Atlanta, Georgia, has been a leader in addressing the needs of Black fathers and their mental health. One of the pillars of FI's hallmark narrative, The Blueprint: Reimagining the Black Father, is health. Over the past year, there have been two Town Hall forums that aggregate fatherhood experts, academicians, and practitioners. The first town hall addressed the importance of health (among other things), but the second town hall specifically spoke to Black dad's mental health. Related, FI has intentionally created a synergy of brotherhood and support through their Men's Den Initiative. The Men's Den Initiative is designed to provide a safe space for men to identify and address mental health issues. They are provided the support and tools necessary for a positive mental health journey. This effort is supported by Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association.

Society has attempted to shine a light on men's health (including mental health) in recent years. November, for example, is Men's Health Month. Campaigns like "Movember" and "No Shave November" have become popular as America highlights the importance of men's health. No-Shave November, for example, began as a Facebook campaign to raise awareness and money for cancer research and charities. Matthew Hill died of colon cancer in 2007, and his family created the campaign in his memory. It has since risen to national prominence. Prostate cancer has also been underscored as an important and preventable disease upon which men should focus. Public Service Announcements (often featuring celebrities) and other types of campaigns have been created to encourage men to get tested for cancer early. In recent years, the highlight on men's health has expanded beyond cancer to include mental health and suicide prevention.

As noted, Black men are among those least likely to receive support for mental health. However, it is critical for Black men to seek treatment-particularly Black dads. Black dads (residential and non-residential) who suffer the results of unaddressed mental health issues may negatively impact their familial relationships. We know that Black dads are important to the lives of their children (Cooper 2015). Research suggests that compared to other ethnic groups, Black fathers have greater or similar levels of involvement with their children (Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon and Tamis-Lemonda, 2008; King, Heard, & Harris, 2004). Research also suggests that Black dads contribute to and influence their children's school adjustment, social competence and psychological well-being (Downer and Mendez, 2005; McHale et al., 2006). Black fathers who do not address stressors related to mental health may have less involvement with their children and/or fewer positive contributions.

Black men need to freely give themselves permission to seek out mental health professionals now more than ever. The past two years of the pandemic and social injustice has added toxic stress to a community that already deals with mass incarceration, deaths of unarmed Black men and discrimination-among other things. Stressors of the fathers are then passed on to children. According to the Hechinger Report, "parental incarceration exposes children to 'toxic stress' and causes them to miss out on nurturing relationships, potentially disrupting brain development and contributing to poor educational outcomes" (Suskind, 2020). Both historical trauma (i.e. the passing on of the negative impact of Jim Crow, etc. from one generation to the next) and present trauma (i.e. the state sanctioned killing of unarmed Black men) have created a chasm in what sociologist W.E.B. Dubois termed the "souls of Black folks."

Historical and present trauma enacted on Black fathers has been described in this way:

We must work through our fears of state-sponsored violence, our experiences with institutional bias, and our own internalized attitudes about our worth in order to exist in the world with the same reassuring confidence so many of our white friends inherited from their fathers. We must learn to handle backhanded compliments about "sticking around" to raise our children and our neighbors' fetishization of our difference (particularly in the suburbs) (Brown, 2020).

When coupling this trauma with systemic challenges that result in lower pay, employment in secondary sector jobs, mass incarceration, and stereotypical media images, it is understandable how mental health challenges among Black dads can abound.

According to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, Black adults in the U.S. are more likely than white adults to report persistent symptoms of emotional distress, such as sadness and hopelessness yet only one in 3 Black adults in need of mental health treatment receives it (American Psychiatric Association, NAMI). This percentage is even lower for Black men and almost non-existent for Black dads.

There are a number of reasons why Black dads may not choose to receive mental health counseling. Among the reasons are:

1. LACK OF ACCESS to mental health professionals **(especially Black ones)**

2. BEING UNINSURED

3. DISTRUST based in the historical maltreatment of Black people by healthcare professionals (i.e. the Tuskegee experiment and the American Psychiatric Association's definition of "drapetomania" linking schitzophrenia to largely Black male aggression)

4. CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDING of mental health and its importance

It is important to note that Black men through artistic expression have long recognized and voiced their awareness and importance of their state of mind.

In 1971, Marvin Gaye wrote these lyrics;

Make me wanna holler, throw up both my hands

in 1982 the Furious Five and Grandmaster Flash in a song entitled, "The Message" expressed mental health in these lyrics;

Don't push me
'Cause I'm close to the EDGE
I'm trying not to lose my head
Ah-huh-huh-huh
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under

In 1998, Tupac Shakur in the song, "Changes" quoted;

I see no changes, wake up in the morning, and I ask myself
Is life worth living, should I blast myself?
I'm tired of bein' poor, and even worse I'm black
My stomach hurts, so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch

Lastly, in 2012, Flo Rida in the lyrics "I Cry" he samples these words,

I know
Caught up in the middle
I CRY, JUST A LITTLE
When I think of letting go

Oh no
Gave up on the riddle
I CRY, JUST A LITTLE
When I think of letting go

As stated, as proof, Black Men have not ignored the existence of their mental health as evident by the aforementioned expressions. Chance the Rapper with NBC News talked about vulnerability (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/chance-rapper-unpacks-black-men-are-guarded-emotions-rcna4336), and Dallas Cowboy's Dak Prescott's narration of the documentary, "Long Live Seven" spoke about mental health awareness regarding the death of Bryce Gowdy and remembering the loss of his own brother to suicide. Lil Wayne and Toronto Raptors, DeMar Rozan have also added to the discussion. It's not hard to discern that Black Men are aware of their mental health and in a safe environment are willing to address their emotions. Their apprehension, therefore, is not their willingness to discuss mental health, but rather how the conversation occurs and the solutions constructed.

If mental health matters for Black fathers, it also matters indirectly for their children. One of the best ways to positively impact the grades and academic well-being of children is to strengthen their fathers' mental health. Studies have found that things like social support; economic resources and social stressors influence fathering identities and paternal engagement with youth (Roy, 2006). Likewise, a study conducted by Coates and Phares, 2015 found that factors like better psychological well-being, lower conviction rates, more parenting-specific support from influential individuals, and higher quality co-parenting relationships are related to higher levels of paternal involvement among non-residential Black fathers. Black dad's mental health impacts their relationship with their children and father involvement has been found to have a positive impact on youth academic outcomes.

In conclusion, it would be a mistake to seek to identify factors that would help youth become successful academically without addressing the issue holistically. Youth are situated within families and fathers are important players within the family unit (whether they are residential or non-residential). More work has to be done to de-stigmatize mental health matters for the Black community and for Black dads. When those who have mental health challenges utilize mental health experts to address toxic stressors that are innate to living in a discriminatory society, everyone connected to that Black dad can be strengthened. Successful youth academic outcomes-in part- are the result of positive and healthy relationships between fathers and their children. Fathers who are engaged and involved in their children's lives are likely to encourage positive academic behavior and to intervene when their children are not doing well. That's why **Black fathers' mental health matters but it matters for them and for their children.**

Call to Action

1. **Make mental health professionals accessible: create collaborations between barbershops, local community centers and local faith communities, physician's offices and health clinics.**

2. **Make mental health services affordable: create collaborations with public and community health services to provide services at minimal or no cost.**

3. **Find more ways to destigmatize mental health: create community campaigns that include fathers as influential spokespeople. Produce a program that builds relationships as well as addresses mental health.**

4. **Creation of more products-curriculum, brochures, etc. that speak to mental health in a holistic way (i.e. dealing with grief: loss of a parent, loss of a business, etc.).**

5. **Understand fatherlessness and/or father absence as one of the adverse childhood experience (ACES).**

6. **Identify and address trauma that stems from systemic inequities related to issues such as legitimation and child support.**

Community Resources

- Father's Incorporated Men's Den — A monthly mental health support group for Black fathers. www.fatherhoodisbrotherhood.com

- Confess Project — The Confess Project has the first and largest organization committed to building a culture of mental health for young men of color, boys and their families. How? We focus on empowering frontline heroes and sheroes in Communities across America. More specifically, we train barbers to be mental health advocates. www.theconfessproject.com

- Black Therapist — https://findblacktherapist.com

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MOYNIHAN INSTITUTE BIO

The Moynihan Institute for Fatherhood Research and Policy provides descriptive and explanatory research and policy positions on issues that impact Black families from the perspective of fathers. MIFRP also utilizes the historical work of Moynihan as a base to research and introduce policy that will positively impact Black families, with the father as the focal point within the family.

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