

The Effect of COVID on Black College Students' Mental Health

According to the October 16, 2020 edition of INSIDE HIGHER ED, COVID has taken a toll on Americans' mental health. That toll is even more severe among college students and other young adults. And, unfortunately, the negative impact on Black college students may be the most significant.

Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among Black children and teens ages 10 to 19. Higher rates of poverty, illness and discrimination in the Black community put Black youth at higher risk for depression, anxiety and other mental health issues. Black Americans are also less likely to seek and receive mental health treatment due to lack of access, cost or stigma.

Loneliness, homesickness and academic stress have been the major causes of the mental health struggles of college students. But today the pressures have escalated significantly. With COVID-19 exacerbating feelings of isolation, and the current political and social unrest at the forefront of many Black students' minds.

According to a Pew Research report last year, Black people with college experience are more likely to say they have faced discrimination. Half of African Americans with at least some college experience also say they have feared for their personal safety because of their race. That share drops to about a third (34 percent) among those with less education.

And it's not just Black students who are concerned with, and passionate about, racism and racial injustice. The overwhelming majority of Generation Zers feel that Black Americans are treated differently than others, and most people in this age group support the Black Lives Matter movement. Remember that this

generation has literally grown up with imagery of racialized violence and protests. Trayvon Martin died in 2012, when some of your students were just 10 years old. We offer three pieces of advice:

1. Serving others has a powerful effect on student health. Thus, when helping students deal with anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns, encourage outward-facing engagement. The Black community has a long legacy of pursuing justice. For decades, African Americans have regularly mobilized around civil rights activism for ourselves and social service for our community. Many Black students come from schools, civic groups or churches that make a regular practice of service, including feeding the hungry, providing after-school tutoring and activities for children, and other practical acts of service that strengthen their communities.

2. Don't underestimate the value of faith for Black students. Black Americans in 2020 are bearing the weight of two pandemics: COVID-19 and the impact of long-standing racial trauma, both of which have left their mark this year in painful ways. Consider that within the past six months some students may have attended the first funeral of their lives (masked and socially distanced). Consider also that they may have participated in the largest demonstrations for racial justice since the civil rights era, and that for many students, both funerals and protests were likely experienced within the context of the Black church.

One way that colleges can help Black students adjust is to be aware that, for many of them, their faith is not checked at the door. It's an integral part of their identity and shapes much of their lives.

Faith sensitivity is especially important for helping Black Americans process and heal from racial trauma. Many mental health practitioners are now acknowledging the vital role that a patient's faith plays in the process of healing from trauma and have begun to incorporate elements of spiritual practices in counseling sessions. Studies have found, for example, that faith is "indispensable" in substance abuse

recovery and is also a valuable component of the treatment of PTSD. A study by the American Psychological Association concluded that recognizing the connection between spirituality and trauma is “essential to a full understanding of human behavior.”

3. Offer more opportunities for connection. This final point may sound obvious, but during a time of social distancing, we must be more proactive and creative about giving students opportunities for social engagement.

For example, make sure that students are aware of ethnic celebrations and social opportunities with cultural minority groups. If there is a Black gospel choir on your campus, even if it’s meeting online this fall, go the extra mile to make that option visible to all students.

Or take a step further: compile a list of local houses of worship and include Black congregations on that list. Make a few phone calls to Black civic groups and explain that your campus is welcoming Black students enthusiastically this semester. Ask if you can include their contact info on a list of off-campus resources. Then make that list available to students. Trying new ways to practically support Black students during this challenging time, you can make your campus a welcoming place where all students can thrive academically, socially and spiritually.