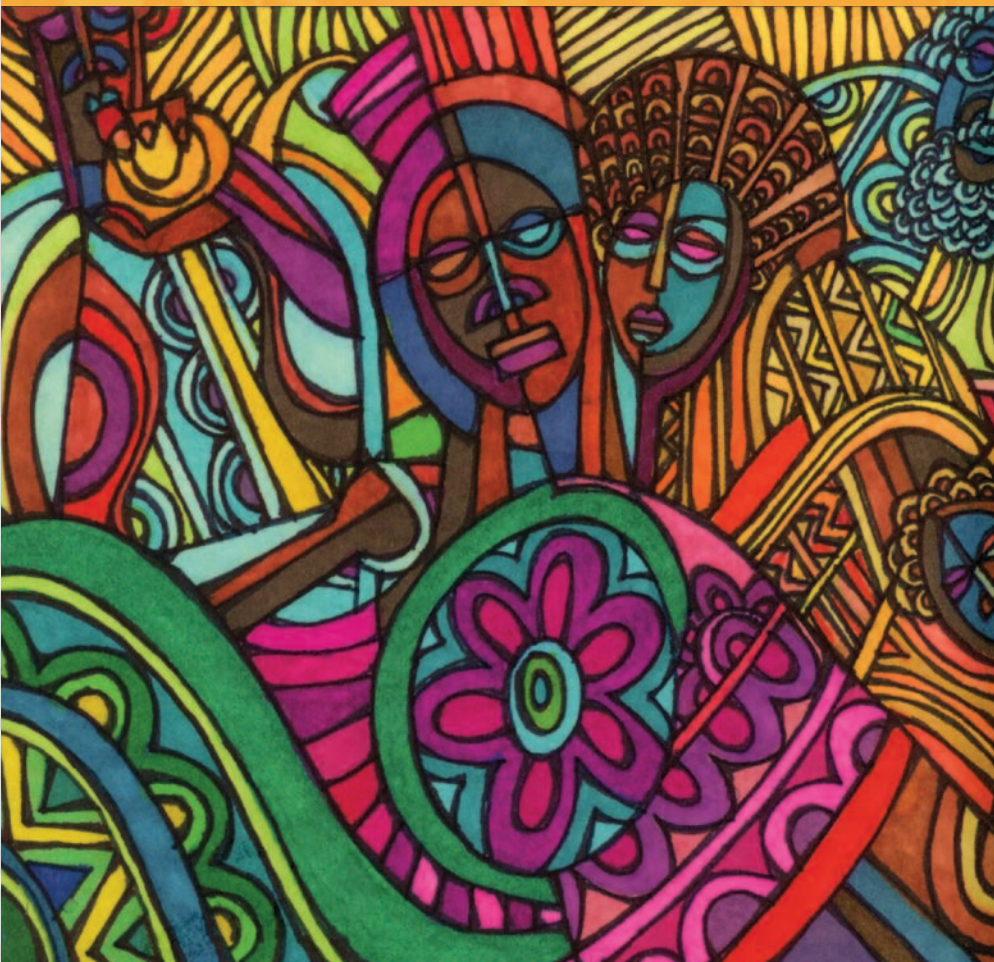


DVD  
INSIDE

# MENTAL HEALTH

A Guide for  
African Americans and Their Families





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# Introduction

African Americans have a unique place in US history. The legacy of slavery and centuries of discrimination continue to have an impact on the lives of African Americans today. Emotional strength, strong social connections, and determination have enabled many African Americans to overcome adversity. Like people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, however, many African Americans experience mental illness.

Mental illness is very common: about 1 in 4 US adults suffers from some kind of mental disorder each year. Depression is a leading cause of disability in the United States. African Americans are just as likely to suffer from a mental illness as white Americans.

For many reasons, mental illness may be more distressing and severe for African Americans than for white Americans. Racism, discrimination, poverty, and lack of health insurance may prevent some African Americans from getting the help they deserve.

Even some African Americans *with* health insurance do not get the care they need or do not seek help in the first place. Having a mental illness is not something many African Americans want to talk about. But mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of! It is a medical problem, just like heart disease or diabetes.

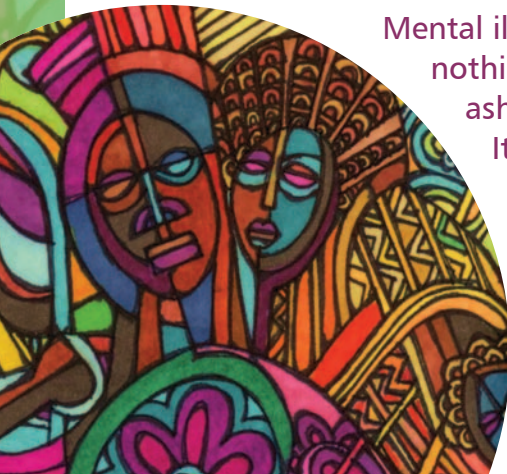
The good news is that help is available. We now know much more about how the human brain works, and many treatments exist that can help people successfully manage mental illness.

Views of mental illness are also changing for the better. People can have hope that if they or a loved one has a mental illness, they can find support and effective care. Family support and the traditional strength of the African American community can help people with a mental illness and promote positive messages about health and well-being.

### ***This booklet and DVD program will help you:***

- Learn about different types of mental illnesses
- Learn about the kinds of healthcare providers who can help
- Understand ways to treat mental illness

Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of! It is a medical problem, just like heart disease or diabetes.



## What Is Mental Illness?

Just as the heart is vital for the physical body, the brain is vital for people's mental health. If the brain is not working correctly, a person's mood, energy level, thinking, or personality can change. Many things can affect how the brain works. Life events, for example, can shift mood up or down. Hardships of many kinds may trigger a depressed mood or anxiety. Some people are also born with differences in the way their brains work—differences that may make them more vulnerable to mental illness.

It is not always clear when a problem with mood or thinking has become serious enough to be called a "mental illness." Sometimes, for example, a depressed mood is normal, such as when a person experiences the loss of a loved one. But if a mental health problem continues to cause distress or gets in the way of normal functioning, it may be defined as a mental illness. If you think you or a loved one may be suffering from a mental illness, contact your healthcare provider, a mental health professional, or one of the resources listed at the back of this booklet.

## Types of Mental Health Professionals

**Psychiatrists** are medical doctors (MDs or DOs) who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. They are mental health professionals who can prescribe medicines. They also treat patients through talk therapy and other treatments.

**Psychologists** have doctoral degrees (PhD or PsyD) and special training in mental illnesses. They most often help people with mental illnesses by providing counseling.

**Clinical social workers** have at least a master's degree in social work. They often deal with family or interpersonal problems.

**Counselors** assist people with many types of problems, including mental health issues. They may not have formal training in psychotherapy. Pastoral counselors use their religious traditions to help those in need.

**Note:** other types of healthcare professionals, such as primary care physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners, may also help patients with mental health issues.

## Types of Mental Illnesses

Mental illness takes many forms. Some are fairly mild and only interfere in limited ways with daily life, such as certain *phobias* (abnormal fears). Other mental illnesses are so severe that a person may need care in a hospital or other institution.

Mental illnesses can affect different aspects of a person's mental life: some affect personality, others affect thinking, perception, mood, or behavior. The following are short descriptions of the most common forms of mental illnesses among African Americans.



## Anxiety Disorders

*Anxiety* is a reaction to fear or stress. Everyone feels anxious sometimes, such as when speaking in front of a group or taking a test. You may feel your heart beating faster, or you may be short of breath or feel sick. Normal anxiety can usually be controlled and does not last much longer than the situation that triggers it.

When anxiety becomes an excessive, irrational dread of everyday situations and interferes with a person's life, it is called an *anxiety disorder*. Approximately 1 in 5 adults experiences an anxiety disorder in any given year.

*Anxiety disorders take many forms:*

- **Panic disorder** is a sudden attack of fear or terror. Symptoms may include a pounding heart, sweating, weakness, dizziness, or smothering sensations. People having a panic attack often fear they are about to be harmed and feel that they are not in control.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** is when a person has frequent upsetting thoughts (*obsessions*) that cause anxiety. People with OCD usually do things over and over (*compulsions*) to try to control the thoughts and anxiety. For example, a person might be afraid the stove was left on and return again and again to check.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** (PTSD) can occur after a person has experienced or witnessed a situation involving physical harm or the threat of harm. People with PTSD may startle easily or be unable to feel positive emotions. They may experience flashbacks of the event that triggered the disorder and be quick to anger.
- **Social anxiety disorder** is when a person feels very anxious and self-aware around others. They may be very afraid they are being watched or judged by others. Their fear of being embarrassed may be so strong that it disrupts relationships, work, and other activities.
- **Specific phobia** is an intense fear and anxiety that is out of proportion to the actual risk or danger posed by the object of the fear. Some common specific phobias are fear of enclosed spaces, open spaces, heights, flying, and blood.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder** (GAD) is when a person feels excessive anxiety and worry more days than not for at least 6 months. The worry is about a number of events or activities and is hard to control. The constant worrying causes distress and disrupts relationships, work, and other activities.



## Depression

*Depression* is a serious medical illness that affects how you feel, think, and act. The most common symptoms are a deep feeling of sadness or a marked loss of interest or pleasure in activities. Depression is more intense and long-lasting than normal sadness and can affect anyone: rich, poor, young, old. It often creeps up slowly, draining the energy, pleasure, and meaning from a person's life. About 7% of adults experience major depression in any given year. A national survey suggests that African Americans appear to be less likely than white Americans to experience depressive disorders during their lifetime.

The primary signs of depression are that the person feels sad or has no interest or pleasure in normal activities for at least 2 weeks. Activities such as eating, socializing, sex, or recreation lose their appeal. People who are depressed also tend to lack energy. They may feel so tired that even small tasks seem exhausting. Other symptoms include:

- Significant weight loss (when not dieting) or weight gain
- Sleep changes (sleeping too much or being unable to sleep)
- Agitation and restlessness
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Inability to think, concentrate, or make decisions
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

African Americans sometimes express depression differently than whites. For example, African Americans who are depressed may be more likely to complain of body aches or other physical symptoms than white Americans.

### Depression continued

Like anxiety, depression can take different forms. Here are the most common:

- **Major depressive disorder** is a potentially life-threatening disease that leaves people feeling hopeless and emotionally exhausted. Jobs, relationships, and life activities are all affected.
- **Dysthymic disorder (also called dysthymia)** is a milder form of depression that persists for years at a time. People with dysthymia may feel gloomy, irritable, or tired much of the time. They may feel hopeless and have difficulty sleeping or concentrating. Their depressed mood can interfere with their relationships, work, and enjoyment of life.
- **Postpartum depression** is when a new mother has symptoms of major depression after her baby is born. This type of depression is fairly common. It is estimated that 1 in 8 new mothers experiences postpartum depression.
- **Bipolar disorder** can cause dramatic mood swings, from feeling high and energetic to feeling very low, sad, and hopeless, often with normal moods in between. The periods of highs and lows are called episodes of *mania* and *depression*. During a manic episode, a person may speak rapidly, feel little need for sleep, and become involved in activities with a high potential for risk or pain. During a depressive episode, a person may feel despair, hopelessness, or fatigue. People with bipolar disorder are at higher risk than the general population for alcohol or substance abuse.

## Schizophrenia

*Schizophrenia* is a severe brain disorder that usually strikes people in their 20s. The cause of schizophrenia is unknown, though genetic factors clearly play a role. When untreated, it can cause people to have delusions or hallucinations. People with schizophrenia sometimes hear voices others don't hear. They may think others are plotting to harm them. Some people with schizophrenia do not recognize that they have a mental illness.

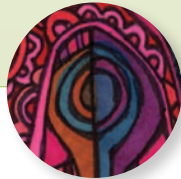
Treatment can help relieve many symptoms of schizophrenia, but most people with this illness cope with symptoms their entire lives. Nonetheless, many people with schizophrenia can live successfully in their communities and lead rewarding lives.



## Eating Disorders

An *eating disorder* is when a person experiences severe disturbances in eating behavior. They may eat very little (*anorexia*). They may eat a lot and then vomit to avoid gaining weight (*bulimia*). Or they may have some other pattern of eating that is disruptive to daily functioning. Most people with an eating disorder are very concerned or distressed about their body weight or shape.

Some studies have shown that African Americans have different attitudes about weight, body size, and attractiveness than whites, with less drive for thinness and greater acceptance of larger body proportions. More recent studies, however, suggest that eating disorders are becoming more common among African Americans.



## Substance Use Disorders

*Addiction* is a long-term brain disease that causes compulsive substance use despite harmful consequences. Some people turn to alcohol or drugs to “medicate” mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression. But these substances usually make a mental illness worse over time. Treating mental illness, therefore, often means treating substance use disorders at the same time. Fortunately, treatments, including medication and talk therapy, are available to help people counter addiction’s powerful effects. Support groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and others) can play an important role in recovery.

African Americans may use some substances, such as alcohol, at lower rates than white Americans. The overall rate of substance dependence or abuse is about the same for African Americans and whites, at about 9%.



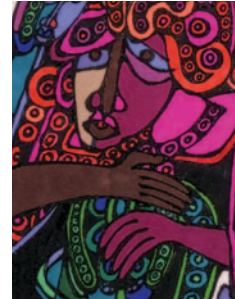


## Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

*ADHD* is a mental disorder that can affect both children and adults. Common symptoms include:

- Impulsiveness: acting quickly without thinking first
- Hyperactivity: inability to sit still or wait for a turn, or fidgeting constantly
- Inability to focus on a task or pay attention

Having ADHD makes learning difficult. It can also get in the way of forming close relationships. African American children have a lower rate of getting treatment for ADHD compared to white children. Some African Americans have reservations about using medicines to treat mental illnesses in children. Many children who have been diagnosed and treated for ADHD by a physician improve their attention, concentration, and learning.



## The Connection Between Mental and Physical Disorders

Mind and body are connected in many important ways. Problems that first affect the mind can later increase one's risk for physical problems, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or malnutrition. On the other hand, problems that first affect the body, such as a disease or an accident, can affect the mind (ie, emotions, thinking, and mood).

This is important for African Americans because they have a much higher risk than white Americans for many types of chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease. These conditions should be treated at the same time that any mental disorders are being treated.



## Mental Health and African American Culture

African Americans may express mental illnesses differently than those of other races or ethnicities. African Americans

are more likely, for example, to come to a healthcare provider with complaints of physical symptoms that, in fact, are caused by a mental illness.

Stigma about mental illness often poses a barrier to African Americans seeking mental health care. One study found that African Americans are much less willing than white Americans to use medicines for a mental illness. Talk with your healthcare provider about specific treatment choices.

Stigma about mental illness often poses a barrier to African Americans seeking mental health care.

## How Is Mental Illness Treated?

There are 2 basic ways mental health professionals help people with a mental illness: talk therapy and medicines.

For some mental illnesses, using a medicine plus talk therapy could be successful.



## Talk Therapy

Talking openly to someone you trust can be comforting. It can also help you see problems or situations more clearly. Many African Americans have such “confiding relationships” naturally as part of their family or social network.

Psychotherapy—sometimes called “talk therapy”—is based on the same idea. Here the person you talk to is trained about mental illnesses. They understand human nature. They do not judge behavior.

Mental illness often causes complicated problems. Other parts of your life or other people can be affected. Relationships may suffer. It may be difficult to work, think clearly, or make good decisions. A trained therapist—especially one familiar with African American culture—can help with these problems or direct you to other people for help with specific issues.

Medicines can be an important part of treating many mental illnesses, but medicines alone may not be enough. They cannot heal damaged relationships or give you insight into the challenges you are facing. These are things that require reflection, thinking, talking and, for some, praying. A therapist can be extremely helpful in this vital part of recovery.



### *Talk Therapy continued*

There are many types of psychotherapies. Some types work better for some types of mental illnesses.

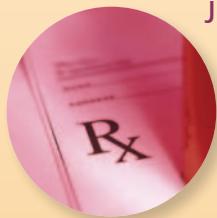
- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** helps people identify and change negative or irrational thought patterns that lead to unhelpful behaviors.
- **Behavioral Therapy** is based on principles of learning, and aims to reinforce desired behaviors while eliminating undesired behaviors.
- **Family Therapy** provides a safe place for family members to share feelings, learn better ways to interact with each other, and find solutions to problems.
- **Group Therapy** typically involves a group of people dealing with the same or a similar mental illness. Discussion is guided by a trained therapist. It can be very comforting and helpful to hear from others who are facing the same challenges you are and to share your experiences.

## Medicines for Mental Illness

Just as many people take medicines daily for diabetes or high blood pressure, many people take a medicine daily for a mental illness. Medicines can calm anxiety, lift depression, and improve attention.

Your age, individual needs, overall health, and personal preferences may be important considerations in treatment and medication decisions. Talk with your health care provider about what choices are available and what may be best for you.

Some medicines for mental illness are taken every day, even when the person feels better. They help keep your mind healthy and prevent the symptoms of an illness such as depression from returning.



Just as many people take medicines daily for diabetes or high blood pressure, many people take a medicine daily for a mental illness.

### *Medicines for Mental Illness continued*

Medicines for long-lasting conditions, such as ADHD, depression, and schizophrenia, may need to be taken on a lifelong basis.

Other medicines are taken only when a person needs them. Some medicines for anxiety can be used this way. Always follow the directions for taking any medicine, and tell your healthcare provider right away if you feel that something is not right. Before

starting any medicine, talk to your healthcare provider to see what kinds of side effects the medicine might cause. If you experience bothersome side effects, call your healthcare provider.



## Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)

ECT stimulates the brain with nonharmful pulses of electricity. ECT can help some people suffering from certain kinds of serious mental illnesses, such as major depression. ECT is usually used for patients who do not respond to medicines or other treatments.

## Alternative Therapies

Several studies show that African Americans are more likely than whites to use alternative health therapies, such as herbal remedies. One commonly tried herbal product is St. John's Wort, a yellow-flowered plant used for a variety of ailments, including depressed mood. A number of studies show that for cases of mild depression, St. John's Wort may be effective.

Talk to your healthcare professional about any alternative therapies you are using or considering. Some herbal products can change the way other medicines work in your body.



## Self-help Therapies

You can boost your chances of recovery from a mental illness in many ways. Anything that strengthens your mind or body, or relieves stress and tension, can help.

### Exercise

Exercise is one of the best things you can do to improve your body, your mind, and your mood. You don't have to go to a gym or do anything elaborate or intense. Brisk walking can be a fine exercise, particularly if it involves hills. Doing chores, such as vacuuming or raking leaves, may also have benefits.

Always talk with your healthcare provider before starting an exercise program. You can begin slowly with just 5 or 10 minutes of walking twice a week, for example. Then you can gradually build up to at least 30 minutes every day.



### Yoga

The many forms of yoga combine poses that stretch and tone muscles with breathing exercises that can help relieve stress and tension. Some studies find that people who practice yoga feel more positive and more energetic after class.

## Relaxation Techniques

Meditation can give you a sense of calm and balance, and help improve your emotional well-being and overall health. Many techniques are available to help you relax your muscles and calm your mind. A common technique is to focus on your breathing while sitting comfortably, with muscles relaxed and eyes closed. If you notice yourself being distracted by thoughts, gently direct your mind back to your breathing. This is continued for 10 to 20 minutes.

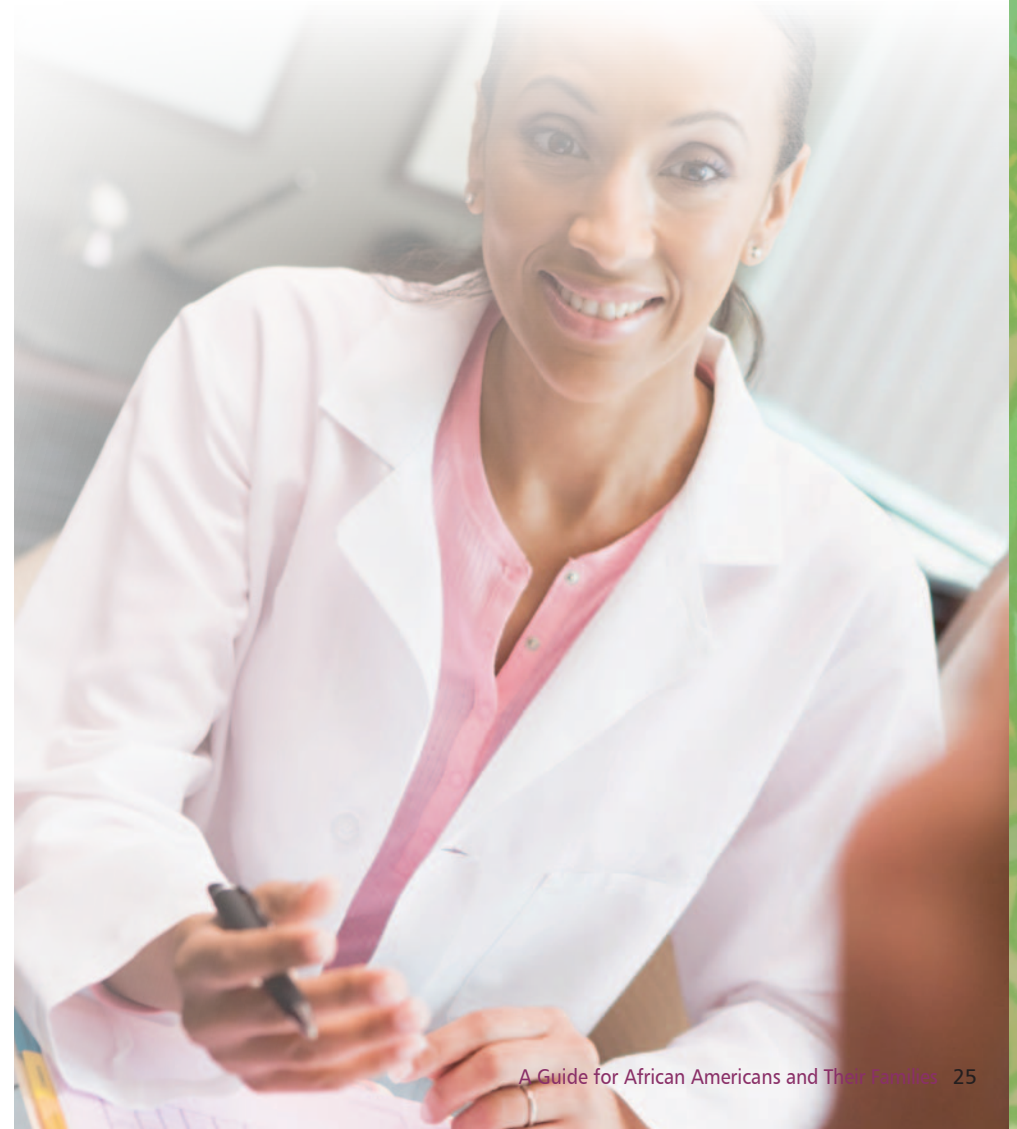
## Support Groups

Many of the organizations listed in the back of this booklet can help you find support groups, either online or in person. By joining such groups, you can learn how other people are coping, hear their stories, ask questions, talk about your experiences, and offer your own advice.



## Where Can I Find Help?

Start by seeing your own healthcare provider, if you have one. She or he may be able to help you or may refer you to someone who specializes in treating mental illnesses. Some of the organizations listed in the back of this booklet can help you find a mental health professional in your area.



## Signs of a High-Quality Mental Health Professional

Everyone deserves high-quality care. If you don't like the care you are getting, you have a right to look for someone else! Keep in mind that a high-quality mental health professional will:

- Care about all aspects of your life. If needed, she or he may be able to suggest other people for you to talk to about such things as housing, financial aid, or child care needs.
- Take a detailed history that includes asking you about cultural factors, such as ethnic/racial heritage, family functioning and supports, and symptoms or illnesses that might be common in African Americans.
- Ask about medical problems, especially diabetes and high blood pressure, that are common in African Americans.
- Clearly explain any diagnosis and possible treatment options—including talk therapy and medicines, as well as possible side effects—and self-help techniques like exercise and support groups.
- Review medicines regularly and adjust treatment when necessary.
- Include family members or friends from the community when appropriate.

## Building Resilience

Being resilient means you are able to cope with challenges, trauma, threats, or other forms of stress. African Americans have traditionally been very strong and resilient. It is important to realize that getting help for mental disorders is a way to increase your resilience!



Here are some other ways to increase resilience and support your mental health:

- Build connections with family and friends
- Accept that change is a part of living—some goals may no longer be attainable as a result of changing situations
- Develop realistic goals and take small, regular steps toward them
- Look for growth in loss
- Nurture a positive view of yourself
- Trust your instincts
- Take care of yourself: you can't help others if you are unwell yourself
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs

## A Role for Spirituality

Studies show that people involved in a spiritual group of some kind have a lower risk of death or illness than those not involved. The reasons for this apparent benefit are not well understood. But the fellowship, goodwill, and emotional support offered by spiritual groups may also promote healthy living and mental health. Some faith communities offer “pastoral counseling” services, which can be an additional support to therapy and/or medicines and may help people cope with mental illness. The specifics of a religion or spiritual practice matter less than that you get involved in a community of caring, supportive people.

## Conclusion

African Americans have overcome great adversity throughout history. This strength can be used today to help manage a leading cause of suffering in the African American community: mental illness. Mental disorders are nothing to be ashamed of. They are real medical problems, just like heart disease or diabetes.

As with these illnesses, there is much you can do to support or improve your health. Help is available! Many good treatments exist today that can help people overcome mental illness. African Americans with mental illness do recover and go on to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Talk to your healthcare professional. He or she may be able to help or point you to other healthcare professionals who can. Remember that your mind and body are connected. By eating right, exercising, and taking care of any other health problems, you can boost your mental health as well.

Many good treatments exist today that can help people overcome mental illness.





## Resources

### **American Psychiatric Association**

[www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org)  
703-907-7300

### **Black African-American Christian Counselors**

<http://baacc.aacc.net>  
800-526-8673

### **Black Mental Health Alliance**

[www.blackmentalhealth.com](http://www.blackmentalhealth.com)  
410-338-2642

### **Choices in Recovery**

[www.choicesinrecovery.com](http://www.choicesinrecovery.com)

### **Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance**

[www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)  
800-826-3632

### **Mental Health Recovery and WRAP**

<http://mentalhealthrecovery.com>  
802-254-2092

### **National Alliance on Mental Illness**

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)  
800-950-6264

### **National Empowerment Center**

[www.power2u.org](http://www.power2u.org)  
800-769-3728

### **National Institute of Mental Health**

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)  
866-615-6464

### **National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse**

[www.mhselfhelp.org](http://www.mhselfhelp.org)  
800-553-4539

### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)  
800-273-8255

### **Recovery International**

[www.lowselfhelpsystems.org](http://www.lowselfhelpsystems.org)  
866-221-0302

### **SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)**

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)  
877-726-4727

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### Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson

Janssen Pharmaceuticals, Inc., a pharmaceutical company of Johnson & Johnson, provides medicines for an array of health concerns in several therapeutic areas, including: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), general medicine (acid reflux disease, infectious diseases), mental health (bipolar I disorder, schizophrenia), neurologics (Alzheimer's disease, epilepsy, migraine prevention and treatment), pain management, and women's health. Our ultimate goal is to help people live healthy lives. We have produced and marketed many first-in-class prescription medications and are poised to serve the broad needs of the healthcare market—from patients to practitioners, from clinics to hospitals.



## Partners

### American Psychiatric Association

The American Psychiatric Association (APA), the nation's leading psychiatric medical association, is an organization of psychiatrists working together to support diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and research of mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Through APA's Web sites, [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org) and [www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org), physicians, healthcare professionals, and the public can access up-to-date information on mental health issues.



### AME Church

The mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME Church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy.



# Credits

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DVD  
INSIDE

# MENTAL HEALTH

## A Guide for African Americans and Their Families

African Americans have overcome great adversity throughout history. This strength can be used today to help overcome a leading cause of suffering in the African American community: mental illness.



About 1 in 4 US adults suffers from some kind of mental disorder each year. And when mental illness strikes, it may be harder on African Americans because many do not get the mental health services they need. Having a mental illness is not something many African Americans want to talk about. But mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of! It is a medical problem, just like heart disease or diabetes.

The good news: help is available, treatment works, and people can recover and lead productive, satisfying lives.

This booklet and DVD program will help you:

- *Learn about different types of mental illnesses*
- *Understand ways to treat mental illness*
- *See how the traditional resilience and strength of the African American community can help people recover from mental illness and achieve their goals and dreams*

