Black Mental Health in the USA: Nothing for Us without Us 2

Systems that promote mental health in the teeth of oppression

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Emotional distress can disproportionately disable individuals from minoritized groups, such as Black Americans, due to multiple intersecting factors. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, culturally sensitive approach to mental health care that promotes inclusivity, accessibility, and representation within the field, to foster empowerment and resilience among minoritized communities. Given the weight of negative factors that can lead to psychological distress and mental illness, the wellness of Black Americans and how they support their mental health is important to acknowledge. In this Series paper, we propose that Black Americans have developed systems for managing many of these threats to their survival and wellbeing.

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Introduction

We present a strategic pathway toward Black American mental health and wellness, consisting of four key elements, to combat oppression and tackle racism. First, we advocate for nurturing a sense of spirit, drawing strength from spirituality and the recognition of the value of all life, a historical source of resilience for Black American communities. Second, we highlight the importance of fostering a sense of nation within the Black American community, emphasizing inclusivity and belonging. Third, we emphasize the pivotal role of devotion to organizing, tracing its roots from anti-slavery efforts to contemporary movements. Finally, we discuss self-sacrifice, which is when individuals commit to the greater good, often at personal cost. This proposed pathway, founded on the centuries of wisdom and experience of Black American communities, advocates for recognizing the sanctity of all life, fostering unity, organizing for change, and embracing self-sacrifice as fundamental components in the ongoing struggle against oppression and for the promotion of racial justice.

Roots of the strategies for promoting survival

Alexander Leighton was a social psychiatrist who connected the state of community social integration to the mental health of community members.[1] He argued that strong social ties enabled a community to do work for its members, including care for the vulnerable, regulation of behavior, and problem solving. Black American communities have built and used strong networks to address not only the array of issues outlined by Leighton, but also the management of the problems created by oppression.

As outlined by Barber, oppression, and its ideology of inequality, is woven into every system of US society, including scientific thinking, social organization, political systems, judicial systems, religious views, and the widespread arming of private citizens, which he has labeled “bad biology, sick sociology, political pathology, corruptible courts, evil economics, militia madness and heretical ontology”.[2] These systems, which began in North America in the 1600s,[3] use dehumanization to deny resources and justify maltreatment. Although originating in the justification of slavery and dispossession of Native Americans, the concept of inequality has been applied to women, religious and sexual minorities, immigrants, and many other groups.

This Series paper will address some of the survival systems launched by Black people in America beginning in slavery in the USA and continuing to the present time. These systems were created to promote psychological wellbeing and wellness in the face of oppression. Enslaved Africans worked to end slavery with every means at their disposal.[4] In the USA, these means included overt and covert rebellion, escaping to freedom, developing a religion of their own, writing petitions, and joining the Union Army during the American Civil War as soldiers, cooks, spies, and laborers. These acts represented a collective rejection of slavery and a belief in freedom and mental liberation. When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, freeing those held as slaves in the rebellious Southern states, the freed people exulted in their freedom and immediately began to reunite their families, take ownership of their churches, and join the political process.[5] One highlight of the period immediately after emancipation was movement—enslaved people had been forbidden the right to move without a pass (ie, a paper authorizing the enslaved person to move off of the plantation, issued by a White person in charge of the plantation such as an owner or overseer), and passes were often contested by White authorities.[3] With emancipation, Black Americans wanted to move, and this desire accelerated with the end of the American Civil War. According to Foner, “Beginning with emancipation, it seemed that half the South’s Black population took to the roads. Southern towns and cities experienced an especially large influx of freedmen during and immediately after the Civil War.”[5]

As described in Foner's *A short history of Reconstruction*, churches were the first institutions to be developed by the freed people, and church "was the first social institution fully controlled by Black men in America".[5] Foner notes that "Churches housed schools, social events, and political gatherings. In rural areas, church picnics, festivals, and excursions often provided the only opportunity for fellowship and recreation. The church served as an 'Ecclesiastical Court House,' promoting moral values, adjudicating family disputes, and disciplining individuals for adultery and other illicit behavior. In every Black community, ministers were among the most respected individuals, esteemed for their speaking ability, organizational talents, and good judgment on matters both public and private."[5]

The second thread of social organizing in Black communities comprised Union League political clubs, which were created after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution gave Black freedmen the right to vote.[5] Black American men were able to run for and hold office, and did so, at every level of government. They worked in coalition with progressive Southern White people and Northern Republicans, especially the radical wing of the party. Black American men articulated a progressive agenda, including universal free education, protections for workers' rights, access to land, and other policies that benefited all poor and working Americans.[5] The importance of this political organizing for reshaping the South, and for sharing power previously held exclusively with the so-called Southern oligarchy, made it a target of forces, both Southern and Northern, who wanted to force the freed people back into some version of highly exploited labor.[5]

Foner notes that another dimension of building the Black American community was a commitment to education. Black American communities gave land, built schools, and paid teachers' salaries.[5] Literacy, denied to the enslaved, was embraced by the freed people. The poignant story of Booker T Washington, desperate for every opportunity to learn to read, was an experience repeated many times over across the South.[6] Between 1865 and 1877, a system of schools had been built that went from primary and elementary schools through universities.[5] Reconstruction ended following the Compromise of 1877, a political deal that removed federal troops from the South. With the withdrawal of federal protection, Southern states began enacting restrictive laws, known as Black Codes, that severely limited the rights of Black Americans.[5]

The end of Reconstruction in 1877 stripped most Black Americans of political power, undermined education, and forced workers into new forms of unfree labor, including debt slavery and peonage.[5] These horrors undid much of the progress made during Reconstruction, but, as Foner states, "...the autonomous Black family and a network of religious and social institutions survived the end of Reconstruction. Nor could the seeds of educational progress planted then be entirely uprooted."[5]

Having forged a community in slavery and transitioned together into freedom, Black Americans continued to use the strength and ingenuity of their collective to fight for survival.[7] By the time the Jim Crow laws (which established the physical separation of races in transportation, schools, hospitals, theaters, and other domains of civic life, and denied voting rights and access to other forms of civic engagement to Black Americans) were enacted in the 1890s, this collective was understood to be a people, and one worthy of an anthem.[8] Lift Every Voice and Sing, known as the Negro National Anthem, was written by James Weldon Johnson with music by J Rosamund Johnson to celebrate the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth.[9] The song was first sung by 500 Black school children in Jacksonville, FL in 1900. James Weldon Johnson did not think much about the song in the aftermath of that performance, but returned some years later to find that it was being sung all over the South and in other parts of the country.[9]

This song is an example of how many Black people then and now are able to identify as one cultural group and unify in the face of racism and psychological duress.[10–12] The sense of unity in opposition to oppression helped Black Americans make progress in the face of segregation (eg, building powerful churches and schools to serve the community) and manage setbacks in the face of the violence and deprivation associated with segregation, such as attacks by the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings. By the mid-20th century, Black American neighborhoods had created hundreds of kinds of organizations, developed skilled leaders in many fields, and made progress in the long fight for civil rights.[13] Regressive policies, including urban renewal, planned shrinkage of neighborhoods, deindustrialization, and mass incarceration, led to upheaval of Black American communities, destroying political, economic, social, and cultural capital that had been accumulated.[14]

The destruction of communities and their wealth undermined Black health: Black–White health disparities became an issue of national concern with the 1985 Heckler Report from the US Department of Health and Human Services.[15] In 1990, McCord and Freeman reported that Black men in Harlem had a shorter life expectancy (54 years) than did men in Bangladesh, which was then one of the poorest countries globally.[16] These disparities have continued, as illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.[17,18] Based on the data presented in the following sections of this Series paper, we propose that, in the face of these setbacks, the systems of survival have continued to support Black Americans in their efforts to promote mental health, fight oppression, protect self-esteem, and support morale in the face of depredations. The figure shows a logic model of efforts to enable survival. In the following sections, we will explore the four areas indicated in the model: sense of spirit,

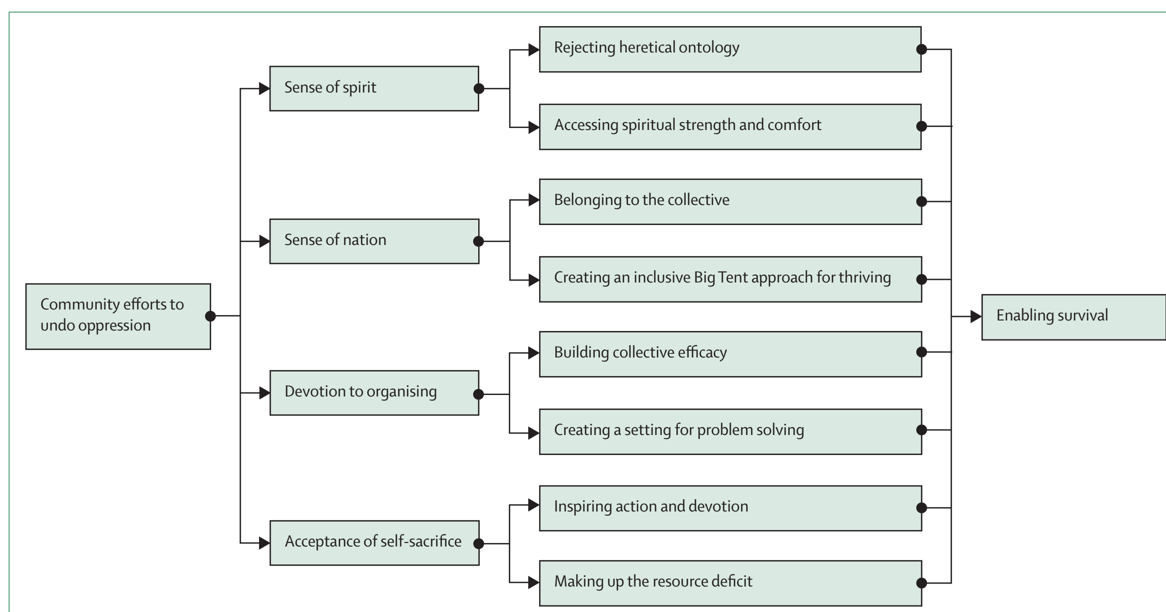

***Figure:* Logic model of efforts that enable survival**
Pathway from community efforts to undo oppression to effective actions of collective resistance.

sense of nation, devotion to organizing, and acceptance of self-sacrifice.

Sense of spirit

The sense of spirit among Black Americans highlights two unique perspectives shaping the Black experience in an oppressive society. First, it describes the notion that everyone is a child of God, which is in direct opposition to the infamous Three-Fifths Compromise, which determined that Southern US states were permitted to count three-fifths of the enslaved Black population to determine taxation and representation in the US House of Representatives.[19] Second, it describes the invaluable role of spirituality as a source of strength and comfort among Black Americans.

In light of dehumanizing policies and practices from slavery to Jim Crow, including the racist legal doctrine referred to as separate but equal (derived from the US Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy v Ferguson*, thereby allowing segregation[20]) and mass incarceration, Black Americans have fought to maintain a sense of personal and communal dignity. Strategies to resist and cope against an oppressive society were steeped in reverence for the sanctity of all life: Black Americans had to believe that Black lives matter long before the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained international attention.

Spirituality has been described as "an essential characteristic of the African-centered worldview that shapes both individual and communal consciousness of persons of African descent".[21] Spirituality is an essential component of preserving mental wellness among Black people.[22] As defined by Koenig and colleagues, spirituality describes a personal quest for answers to ultimate questions about life, meaning, and relationships to the sacred.[23] Ethnic diversity should be considered in the breadth of spirituality practices among the Black collective. For example, among Caribbean Black people, various ethnographic accounts of the diverse religious traditions of the Caribbean region[24,25] have focused on indigenous religious and spiritual systems such as voodoo (also called Vodun), obeah, Santeria, espiritismo, Orisha, and Rastafarianism.[26]

Sense of nation

Black Americans' collective resistance and thriving has been cultivated through the intentional work of developing a sense of nation that sustains Black mental wellbeing. This sense of nation has manifested and continues to progress through various movements (eg, the Colored National Labor Union, the Black Arts Movement, and African American Women in Defense of Ourselves) that prioritize belongingness and inclusiveness.[27–30] Belongingness refers to an emotional and interpersonal state of connection and support between one and others in their environment.[31] Inclusiveness highlights acceptance by and being valued within one's community.[32] These factors are essential elements of nation building. Cultivating a sense of nation has been and continues to be a strategy of survival via self-definition and adherence to philosophical assumptions about life, relationships, and purpose, which imbues Black Americans with dignity, autonomy, and connection.[33] Several historical and contemporary movements (eg, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], the Student National Coordinating Committee,[34] and the American

For more on **Black Lives Matter** see https://blacklivesmatter.com

For more on the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** see https://naacp.org

For more on the **American Descendants of Slavery Advocacy Foundation** see https://www.adosfoundation.org

Descendants of Slavery Advocacy Foundation) have exemplified key features of nationhood among Black Americans: shared language, territory, economic life, and psychological paradigms.[33] A sense of nation fosters belonging among Black Americans, which provides physical, psychological, and spiritual resources, and offers opportunities for even more inclusiveness within Black communities to forge stronger bonds and centers of power and empowerment.

Several social movements have advanced a sense of nation among Black Americans since 1619. The Niagara Movement (1905–11) was one of the first formal attempts after emancipation to cultivate a sense of belonging via organizing that demanded liberty and resisted compromise.[35] The Niagara Movement's mission was equity for Black Americans in the areas of voting, economics, and health care.[36] This movement gave way to the NAACP in 1909, co-founded by Ida Wells-Barnett and others, which was built around the idea of a multiracial coalition against anti-Black violence and oppression. The NAACP advanced its mission of racial equality through the judicial system and non-violent protests. Although the NAACP was, and is, one of the largest social justice organizations in the USA, there are some Black Americans who have critiqued its ability to provide a true sense of belonging, given its emphasis on inter-racial relations,[37] which was also a critique of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

As a result of the distrust of inter-racial coalitions, other movements arose that emphasized solidarity exclusively among Black Americans. The Nation of Islam[38] and Black Panthers[39] are two examples of social movements that provided a sense of belonging to Black Americans and emphasized the centrality of their racial identity to self-concept, self-worth, and self-determination. The Nation of Islam was founded in 1930 by Wallace D Fard, and was designated as a religious organization with the purpose of facilitating Black spiritual alignment, self-definition, and economic self-sufficiency.[38] The Black Panthers movement emphasized education, re-education, and self-determination of Black people.[39] Their Ten-Point Program articulated many of the mechanisms through which it hoped to establish a common sense of belonging among Black Americans, including collective control of health care, education, and housing, and the end of US capitalistic exploitation across the globe. We feel these movements together represent an emphasis on nation building that prioritized intracommunity connection, empowerment, and power—all tools to promote mental health in the face of oppression.

One of the most recent social movements, BLM, is another example of Black Americans' push to cultivate a sense of nation. Officially founded in 2013, after the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, BLM appeals to many Black Americans who are invested in inter-racial, transnational, and intersectional freedom; an estimated 15–26 million people joined the protests on June 6, 2020.[40] BLM is a global movement that seeks to end White supremacy and stop violence against Black people. BLM draws attention to the fight for Black lives to be treated with dignity and protection from anti-Black brutality, and it highlights Black joy, imagination, and genius. This movement emphasizes, in its mission, the inclusion of all Black lives along the intersections of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability status, and immigration status.

From the Niagara Movement to BLM, Black people have pooled their resources to create bonds that foster collective resistance through bolstering a sense of belongingness. These movements have harnessed the gifts of Black people (eg, democracy, economic development, folk song, art, and faith);[41] however, these movements that aimed to build a sense of nation to foster belongingness have not always been entirely inclusive of Black people across gender, age, socioeconomic status, ability status, and sexual orientation.[42] Black scholars and activists such as Patrisse Cullors and Kimberle Crenshaw have used their work to highlight the imperative that Black people build a sense of nation to foster collective resistance by incorporating the very best gifts of all Black community members to ensure sustained liberation and wellbeing.[43] Such scholars and activists argue that the more inclusive we can be of Black people at the intersections of various marginalized identities, the better we will be able to maintain good holistic health and maintain our efforts for liberation and thriving.[44] For example, including the experiences, talents, and skills of Black LGBTQIA people might help to provide a model for all Black people across various intersections of social identities and experiences of societal oppression, to imagine new ways of being. Black LGBTQIA people challenge restrictive norms of cisgenderism and gender roles, which can hinder emotional exploration, playfulness, and expression.[45] We believe that this inclusiveness has the potential to enhance emotional consciousness and has implications for more affirmative treatment of self and others. Overall, Black Americans have shown skill at creating a sense of nation to support our collective resistance. The goal now is to work to sustain and strengthen the belongingness and inclusivity to ensure sustained mental wellbeing.

Devotion to organizing

Black Americans have been devoted to organizing from the early days of their arrival in North America.[46,47] In the period before the American Civil War, organizing efforts focused on ending slavery. Black people formed the foundation of the Abolitionist Movement in the north, and resistance to slavery penetrated every area of slave life in the North and the South. The Underground Railroad, a secret and loosely organized set of safe houses and guides that supported enslaved people seeking freedom in northern US states or Canada, is an example

of this organizing effort.[46] A plaque at the Underground Railroad exhibit in Niagara Falls describes the Black waiters who could mobilize on a moment's notice to protect people in danger of being captured by slave catchers.[48] Several books have documented how Black people participated in the Underground Railroad to further Black American freedom and liberation.[49–51] In the historical text *Bound for Canaan*,[46] Fergus Bordewich includes a chapter on abolitionist David Ruggles and recounts the events in the mid-19th century, detailing the central involvement of Black people in the Underground Railroad.[50] He describes the systems that were constructed by Black people, including conductors and safe houses where Black people could rest and receive food and money. LaRoche highlights the importance of free Black people in these deliberate networks, as their presence was essential in the expansion of the Underground Railroad.[49] Finally, Frost describes how archeological remains (eg, traces of houses and sheds) in states throughout the USA, such as Kentucky and Michigan, and across the border in Canada, showed the existence of the Underground Railroad and the role of Black abolitionists, lay workers, and former slaves in building safe pathways toward liberation.[51]

Following the Union's victory in the American Civil War, the Black Church emerged as the spiritual, cultural, economic, and political hub of Black American communities.[52] The Black Church describes a heterogeneous group of institutions that represent some of the most trusted, accessible, and influential supporting organizations in the USA.[53] The term Black Church is classically defined as the collection of seven historically Black denominations of the Christian faith: the African Methodist Episcopal; African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated; the National Baptist Convention of America Unincorporated; the Progressive Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ.[54] These denominations encompass about 65 000–75 000 churches in the USA with an estimated membership of 20–24 million people. Other denominations or affiliations of the Black Church exist; however, about 80% of all African American Christians are estimated to belong to one of these seven denominations.[52,54] Little is known about how membership of the Black Church or attendance varies among Black ethnicities (eg, Black Latino, Black Caribbean, or Black Asian). The Black Church supports the mental health of Black Americans through a myriad of social justice movements, including voting registration, food pantries, and free education.[55–57] We cannot write about the liberation of Black Americans without emphasizing the role of the Black Church as a portal to psychological freedom.

Many groups, such as the Black Panther Party and BLM, might resonate with more than one thematic category, notably both nation building and devotion to organizing. Similarly, institutions such as the Black Church, although pivotal in organizing efforts, in our opinion, can also be closely intertwined with the importance of sense of spirituality within the Black community. These dynamics are complex and multifaceted, often transcending the boundaries of discrete categories. They might operate in tandem, reinforcing and complementing one another, rather than existing in isolation. This acknowledgment prompts us to reflect on the interconnectedness of these elements within the broader context of Black American communities and their history of organizing.

Education is another form of organizing that Black Americans use to promote mental health. Education takes many forms, including the establishment and running of schools at all levels. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders attended an all Black school, Philander Smith College in Little Rock, AR, where the president, Dr ML Harris, was a Black man.[58] Elders recounted how the presence of the president of her college played a key role in her success, because he intervened when the registration team could not find evidence of her scholarship.[59] Black representation and leadership in higher education is salient in Elders' account of ways Black people have thrived in the USA, along with the formidable role of Black colleges and universities.[59] Black Americans who pursue higher education collectively understand that this is an essential way to ensure the success of the next generation.[60,61]

Labor organizing by Black Americans has been an important sector of organizing work. The story of strikes by Black laundry workers in 1881 highlights the determination to receive adequate pay for their hard work.[62] As the union movement grew, Black people were often excluded from existing White unions, and had to form their own.[63] In some cases, as with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, these unions were successful, but often the division of the working class undermined the efforts of all unions.[64] The creation of industry-wide unions in the 1930s marked a breakthrough against segregated unions, and gave the union movement the strength it needed to make great advances in pay and working conditions.[63] Black workers, in addition to their work in the unions, organized for fair employment practices in other settings; for example, the National Negro Labor Council led struggles to desegregate many workplaces, including the airlines and railroads, from 1951 to 1956.[65,66]

Black Americans also organized social and fraternal organizations, burial societies, and cultural institutions. When they were excluded in any domain, Black Americans organized parallel organizations that ranged from the Negro leagues in baseball to the national societies in medicine, dentistry, and law.[67] Although Black community organizations have received well deserved praise, illegal organizations, although reviled, have also been part of the work of organizing. The Bloods and

Crips are infamous gangs that have emerged in Black communities.[68] Although the gangs are violent and their work is illegal, the gangs arose in the aftermath of deindustrialization, when Black men and women were likely to be excluded from the workforce.[69] The gangs offered an alternative pathway to survival.[68] Associating gang membership with survival might seem counterintuitive; however, scholars have noted that when the physiological needs (eg, food, clothing, and shelter) of Maslow's hierarchy are not met,[70] a person might be motivated to fill them by, as stated by Malcolm X, "any means necessary".[71] In this context, one might appreciate how an individual would join a gang to ensure access to shelter, food, and physiological safety and belonging, regardless of the negative consequences. In this way, we contend that gang culture can help people from historically excluded backgrounds meet their basic needs.

The breadth of organizations that promote safety for Black Americans might be difficult to imagine, but it can be seen in the photographic collection of Charles (commonly known as Teenie) Harris, who worked in The Hill District and other Black communities in Pittsburgh. His large archive, now housed at the Carnegie Museum of Art, documents the vast number and wide range of Black organizations that flourished in those neighborhoods.[72]

Self-sacrifice

All communities struggle to achieve the kind of social integration that Leighton described as the foundation of health.[1] Black Americans, like all others, work to create strong social bonds, but in our opinion they must also do the extra work of survival: creating a sense of spirit, developing the sense of nation, and devoting themselves to organizing. Visible images of self-sacrifice abound in the photographs of civil rights demonstrations, in images of grandparents taking in children who lost their parents to disease or violence, and in images of the daily work that people do to survive and provide for their families in the face of deprivation.[73] This message is also carried in poetry, religious messages, and family stories. In all these ways, the community passes along the expectation of self-sacrifice, of giving back, and of achieving on behalf of the larger community of Black people.

Black American children are often taught from a young age that they will be expected to sacrifice on behalf of the larger whole. This sacrifice might mean participating in school desegregation, attending a civil rights march, or achieving in school and helping the community move into spaces that were previously closed to Black Americans—ie, becoming the first of something, as Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson did, when she became the first Black American woman appointed to the Supreme Court.[74] She noted, "It has taken 232 years and 115 prior appointments for a Black woman to be selected to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States. But we've made it. We've made it, all of us... In my family, it took just one generation to go from segregation to the Supreme Court of the United States."[74] Self-sacrifice carries a high cost for the individual, which is acknowledged, for example, by elders saying: thank you for what you do for us. This simple phrase is loaded with meaning, as it echoes the childhood orientation to self-sacrifice as a way of life, and affirms that effort is seen, understood, and appreciated.

Kessler describes the gendered toll that self-sacrifice can take in his cost of caring hypothesis,[75] which describes higher psychological duress among female caregivers compared with men who were engaged in helping others in society. Women were also more prone to showing symptoms of mental illness compared with men, and middle-class Black American women were more likely than their White counterparts to provide financial support to their family.[75,76] Thus, although self-sacrifice is essential to the survival and enduring spirit of Black people, we feel sacrifice should be balanced with self-care. Audre Lorde, a Black woman and feminist scholar, said: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."[77] Here, she expertly makes the distinction between merely surviving and thriving. Black American thriving involves overcoming the persistent barriers and challenges posed by racism to attain a state of wellbeing, prosperity, and equality. Thriving extends beyond just surviving, and addresses the need for equitable access to resources, opportunities, and rights that enable Black Americans to flourish and reach their full potential.[78,79]

Moving from survival to thriving requires comprehensive and sustained efforts on multiple fronts. Some key factors that could contribute to this transformation are presented in the panel.[80] Overall, moving from survival to thriving for Black Americans requires a sustained commitment from individuals, communities, institutions, and society as a whole to combat racism, create opportunities, and promote social and economic justice.[79]

The special role of Black elders

Shorter life spans and higher morbidity rates are characteristic of Black Americans.[16] Projects such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences study have shown that Black Americans carry a heavy burden of predisposing events that set up this excess morbidity and mortality from an early age.[81] Black Americans who reach old age, especially those who manage to do so in good health, are a precious and special part of the Black community.

Black elders are a unique group of individuals who are ethnically heterogeneous[82] and historically connected by a collective voice, and we must not take them for granted. Their collective voice serves to guide and empower Black people and the generations to come.[83–85] Elders exert various types of intergenerational influence in the Black

family, which have changed over time.[84] Elders have a role in providing cultural knowledge as a way of closing the educational gap and making school more relevant to Black American children.[85]

For centuries, Black Americans have faced social, economic, and political injustices, the origins of which lie in events rooted in racial oppression dating as far back as the 16th century.[86] The inception of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, in which millions of men, women, and children were displaced from Africa and forced into slavery in the Americas, marked the beginning of the collective historical struggle that Black Americans have endured for centuries.[87] The diaspora from west and central Africa gave rise to an ethnically diverse group of Black Americans who once were enslaved, but later became free to make profound contributions to American history.

Despite the abolition of slavery at the end of 1865, the remnants of racialization in the USA have persisted and continue to be ingrained in every aspect of American life in the forms of institutional and structural racism.[88] The pervasiveness of racism and its impact on Black people have been discussed at length; Black psychiatrists have been central to developing the scholarship that underscores this dynamic.[22,88,89] Currently, the struggles to overcome barriers to equality continue, and Black elders can serve as mentors and teachers for navigating this endemic issue. Black elders have endured centuries of oppression, yet have managed to survive and thrive in a variety of ways that have shaped the rich history of the USA. Therefore, we assert that protecting the legacy of this population is important, so that it lives on even after individual elders die.

The historical experiences and struggles of Black ancestors and elders can give rise to the collective voice, which is a source of wisdom and an anchor of resilience that we feel must be amplified. The collective voice narrating the generations of shared suffering that tested mind, body, and spirit, conveys the lessons that we must learn to enhance our own understanding and appreciation of history, awareness of the present, and foresight to shape the future. We feel the collective voice refers to one's oral personal account and other modalities of communicating lived experience either through music, art, dance, literature, or poetry. The collective voice conveys more than just a personal account of the events, but also imparts the emotive or affective component of Black history, and speaks to the physical and psychological repercussions from the accumulation of ongoing racism.[90]

American society must learn to recognize the potential long-term effects of chronic racial trauma on Black Americans as we age, so that we can develop ways to write our story that can be passed down to future generations. The psychological and emotional injury caused by chronic racism is so profound that it has been hypothesized to result in trauma that might potentiate neurobiological changes that can be transmitted across generations.[90,91] Accumulation of such stressors over time might lead to physiological changes through the so-called weathering hypothesis, accounting for the disproportionately high rate of adverse health outcomes in Black Americans.[81,91,92]

Despite these negative outcomes, Black elders continue to inspire Black Americans through a shared reality of survival and devotion to protecting and caring for the younger generation. Black elders can sustain Black mental health via actions of self-sacrifice and conscious efforts to preserve the integrity of the family unit and the community. A prime example of this self-sacrifice was in the 1990s, during the cocaine epidemic, when many grandparents took on the responsibility of raising grandchildren.[93] Black elders have served as surrogate parents and role models to Black American children and adolescents, leading by example and inspiring us to effectuate societal and political change for a better future.

Panel: Factors to support a thriving mental health state for Black Amerians

Addressing systemic racism
Challenging and dismantling systemic racism in institutions and policies is crucial, including advocating for equitable education, employment opportunities, and criminal justice reforms.

Economic empowerment
Promoting economic opportunities and wealth-building initiatives for Black communities can create a stronger foundation for advancement.

Cultural recognition
Celebrating Black culture, history, and achievements, and ensuring proper representation in media, arts, and public spaces, can foster a sense of pride and empowerment.

Mental health and wellbeing support
Providing access to mental health resources that acknowledge and address the impact of racism on mental wellbeing is essential.

Community support and activities
Creating and fostering supportive networks and community initiatives that uplift and empower Black individuals can be instrumental in fostering thriving.

Education and awareness
Raising awareness about racial injustices, historical contexts, and the importance of allyship can help create a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Conclusion

We expect that the model of collective resistance described here offers useful guidance for psychiatrists

and mental health leaders in many sectors. Although treatment of mental illness is often seen as the focus of intervention, we believe that Black Americans have been able to survive and thrive through community and collective action. This model outlines paths of mental health and liberation in the face of oppression. Community mental health has long had a larger perspective that encompasses support of community leaders and community organizations to effectuate mental health and wellness. This concept is most useful in understanding and centering how best to promote and support the mental health of Black Americans.

Contributors

MF, ED, SHH, JL, and AJ all contributed equally to the writing and editing of this Series paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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