

Hampton University's Efforts to Change the Stigmas Around Mental Health

Posted At : January 22, 2020 10:59 AM | Posted By : SHSJC

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At a time when people are becoming more aware of the importance of mental health, the fields of psychology and counseling are not meeting the mental health needs of African Americans in the United States. Hampton University's faculty and students are analyzing the problem and preparing to make a difference.



The inner-cultural stigmas that keep people from seeking help include racial stereotypes and a history of abuse by medical providers that breeds mistrust in patients. In some cases, generations of poverty have left a legacy of mental health issues and a lack of ability to determine when to seek help.

Also, only 6.2 percent of psychologists and 12.6 percent of social workers are people of color, according to the National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI). Hampton wants to increase the number of African Americans working in the field.

"If we aren't able to address those pressing problems as mental health care providers, how can we expect minority groups to ask for our help?" said Dr. Kevin Tarlow, a Hampton University professor.

For the past seven years, 10 percent of Hampton University's student population has been psychology students. At least 60 to 70 percent of the students attend graduate school. There are nine faculty members in the Department of Psychology, who partner with the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, which allows students to experience hands-on patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorders and other conditions.

African American patients tend to feel more comfortable about therapy when seeing African American psychologists. While improved results are challenging to quantify, African Americans report being more comfortable seeing a professional who comes from the same cultural background as they do and say they are more likely to seek help from a black doctor, according to Harvard Business Review.

Theoretically, the color of someone's skin should not determine a psychologist's effectiveness or empathy. However, many students in Tarlow's fall class think there is an implicit feeling of having a connection if they walk into a therapist's office and see that they are also African American. Students agreed that they feel that way themselves.

"When you have someone that looks like you, you can relate to them better," one student said. "You can build a relationship with your therapist and, in turn, that will help you out more."

But that requires getting patients in the door. And, experts say that's where the problem starts. Forty percent of African-Americans are more likely to experience more mental health issues than the general population and are less likely to seek help, according to The Office of Minority Health.

"It's almost as if we're in denial, as if we can't have something wrong with us," said Brianna Robinson, a senior psychology major. Problems that emerge as children, if not dealt with, can get worse and be more detrimental, she said.

African American children and youth in impoverished environments are often exposed to violence, and they are more likely to suffer the loss of a loved one, to be victimized, to attend substandard schools, and suffer from abuse and neglect. In turn, they usually encounter too few opportunities for safe, organized recreation and other constructive outlets, according to The National Research Council.

Mental health issues aren't considered to be medical issues within the African American Community, but are interpreted as character flaws, signs of weakness, or personal problems that can be overcome.

"It can be very much like pray about your problems or pretend they don't exist. Meanwhile, we're just continuing to suffer," said Dr. Kristie Norwood, director of the Counseling Center.

Social stigmas against mental health play a significant role in discouraging African Americans from seeking help. Norwood is working to normalize the idea of seeking mental health treatment. She believes that it isn't something a person should be ashamed or afraid of doing. Norwood's passion for psychology came from wanting to help people who look like her, something the program emphasizes.

"We have to change the stigma to be open to talking about it and get the necessary help," said Autumn Griffin, a senior psychology major. "A lot of people feel that if they have a mental illness, they are crazy. That's not what mental health is."

Dr. Kermit Crawford, psychologist and chair of Hampton University's psychology department, thinks some African Americans are less likely to seek help because they aren't educated about mental health.

"When I was growing up, I didn't think about seeing anyone as a therapist. There weren't any therapists in my community," Crawford said. "I didn't know anyone who would say they are seeing a therapist because they didn't want to be looked on as weak or not fit for what they are doing."

To change the stigma, psychologists have to look at why the stigma exists in the first place.

"Sometimes the outcomes are different, not because the illness is different,

but because the health care system can't provide care in a non-discriminatory way," Tarlow said.

In many cases, minority groups aren't able to afford health care options that aren't going to discriminate against them.

"Even when different groups have the same amount of stress or illness, we have to look at what the access to care is like for those groups," Tarlow said. "Can they access affordable, quality mental health care that works for them?"

The cost of mental health resources is not only less accessible in some communities, but it can also be a financial burden. In 2005, Crawford worked with victims and evacuees of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. Later, he worked in Massachusetts, where two planeloads of Hurricane Katrina evacuees came.

He remembers speaking to one patient who said: "I first have to get my life together. I have to get my family together. I have to get my housing together. I have to get my employment together. I'll have my mental break down later."

Hampton University's psychology department faculty have science-oriented and diverse backgrounds, Norwood said. As a new member of the faculty, she was thrilled to see how invested the staff is in their students during their undergraduate career and preparing them for graduate school.

As part of that initiative, the faculty is working on project grants that could help students spend time in real-world psychological patient environments.

Hampton University has continuously made strides to help people in the Hampton Roads area who need to talk about their mental health. The first chair of the department was Kenneth Clark, who conducted the Doll Study, which looked at the psychological effects of segregation on African American children. Clark and his wife, Mamie Clark, used four dolls, identical except for color, to test children's racial perceptions.

Some years later, the "father of black psychology," Reginald Jones, became chair of the department.

"We've educated a lot of students over time. We try to encourage students to continue their education in psychology and go to therapy," Crawford said.

Hampton University's psychology students are trained to be graduate students during their time in the program. Students have the option to take a few different avenues; some students go on to become licensed clinical psychologists or enter into a master's degree program. Some students focus more on social work, which allows them to become a licensed clinical social worker.

Psychologists pride themselves on the ability to pay it forward and help those who seek help. For instance, Crawford believes he is doing God's work.

"The gift that I was given, I feel like I'm giving back," he said.

PSYCHOLOGY ORGANIZATIONS

Hampton University is home to many organizations that welcome students who have a passion for psychology in the African American community. The Psychology Club provides many opportunities for its members through social interaction, community service, and panel discussions.

The organization also sponsors a variety of activities throughout the school year, including volunteering at local shelters and nursing homes, fundraising for charities, campus speakers, and interactive movie nights.

Psi Chi is the International Honor Society at Hampton University. The mission of this prestigious organization is to encourage, stimulate and maintain excellence in scholarship in efforts to advance the science of psychology. Members Psi Chi work together to initiate community service projects, host seminars and continuously aim to improve the organization's mission.