

**NO PANDEMIC AND NO KIND OF
CRISIS CAN EXTINGUISH THE LIGHT
OF CHRIST.**

**MAY PEOPLE LET HIS LIGHT INTO
THEIR HEART AND LET US LEND A
HAND TO THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST.
IN THIS WAY GOD WILL BE BORN
ANEW IN US AND AMONG US.
-POPE FRANCIS**

Mental Health in the African American Community During a Pandemic

By Cathy Green-Miner, LPC-S



As I sat on the beach meditating the week before Thanksgiving, I thought about the countless number of my African American sisters and brothers who have lost loved ones due to COVID19. I prayed for them believing that someday their grief would subside much like the waves splashing in front of me. The grief they carry is a grief I know all too well. It ebbs and flows and leaves a trail of sorrow and sometimes a glimmer of joy. It surprises you at times you least expect it. Grief is profoundly felt as you gather at the table when a loved one who usually sits in that chair with that glass and that turkey and dressing piled on his plate is no longer there. Grief never goes away, it just changes.

When the pandemic began to rear its ugly head, our three o'clock school announcement was disturbing. All of a sudden, our lives were upended. On that faithful Friday, March 13, 2020, we were told that the governor of Louisiana had declared a state of emergency and that students would have to do virtual learning from home and that we were all on lockdown. After the bell rang, a student ran to me and started crying. She asked me if this was the last time she would ever see me. I wrapped my arms around her as she wept and told her no, that we would definitely see each other again. Knowing in my heart that I had no idea of the danger lurking outside in the air would render us dead or alive, I still reassured her that we would survive this.

On the following Monday, faculty and staff were trained to teach and monitor classes using the Zoom platform. By Thursday, St. Mary's Academy launched its first set of Zoom classes. We were the first in the city to return our students to some semblance of learning. Students were happy to see each other but later, I would find out how devastatingly lonely many would become. Grief would follow as a few lost parents, grandparents and other relatives to COVID19 – a strain of coronavirus that continues to morph well into November leaving over 250,000 dead in the United States alone. As of December 1, 2020, the World Health Organization reports over 1,473,746 COVID19 deaths worldwide.

Only seventeen days after we were sent home, we lost a beloved teacher, Mrs. Michelle Arnold, to COVID19 only to find out that her husband had died the day before. Our school community and the New Orleans community were heartbroken and fearful. Families, teachers and students were dealt a blow that brought us all to our knees begging God to make it stop. We know now that God is working

through first responders, medical personnel and scientists who are feverishly working to find a vaccine or a cure.

As a licensed counselor, I have had to place self-care as my number one priority so as to avoid burnout. Every day has been a mental health meltdown for so many around me. I keep my head straight with the help of an amazing counselor who gets me. Many of my students and coworkers are experiencing anxiety, depression, unemployment, anger and food insecurity. Because of the support of our principal, Sr. Jennie Jones, SSF, a Sister of the Holy Family, and the administration, our counseling department has been actively checking in with students and faculty during this pandemic. Our school community embraces mental health counseling. We are an historically Black Catholic K-12 school founded in 1867 by the Sisters of the Holy Family and whose foundress is Venerable Henriette Delille, who I call Saint Henriette.

When I first began my journey as a counselor, my mission at St. Mary's Academy was to change the stigma of mental health in this glorious Black Catholic community. I also wanted to be who I needed when I was a student there. I, along with my eight siblings, became orphaned way too young. I thank God for the village because it was through so many family members, neighbors and teachers that my siblings and I were able to cope with the loss of our parents. Although we navigated this maze called life, we each needed and deserved a space to process the heart



(Photo by Tamiko Massey)

wrenching grief and trauma we experienced as children. Back then, seeing a mental health counselor meant that you were "crazy." If you were experiencing anxiety or were flooding the pillow with tears, you were told to "suck it up" and "keep it moving." If you looked sad, you were told to "give it up for your sins." If you had problems, it was "give it to the Lord." So, we learned to stuff it. We were resilient, yet stuffy. Sounds familiar?

Many in New Orleans remember “The Third Floor of Charity.” If you went there, it meant you were dropped off at the loony bin where “crazy” people were brought to get unsolicited mental health care. Then there was “Mandeville”, another place for “crazy” people across the lake. I believed we joked about these mental health hospitals because we did not understand mental health or addiction and we certainly kept quiet about it if a family member ended up in either place. Mental health was not discussed in Black homes and, just like sexual abuse, it was swept under the rug.

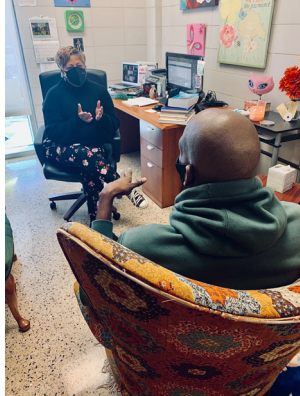
The African American community never really trusted psychiatrists and doctors, and rightfully so. Any theoretical approach to mental

health was based on wealthy white people’s experiences. Black men and women and other people of color were routinely experimented on or operated on without anesthesia or consent. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study and forced sterilizations of Black women were as American as the stars and stripes. To this day, immigrant women from Central America and Mexico are being sterilized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) doctors for no reason other than for the purpose of eugenics.

The emotional, physical and mental trauma that slavery alone inflicted on African trafficked humans, is carried in our DNA, according to Dr. Joy DeGruy, a world renowned African American professor of social work, entrepreneur and publisher. Dr. DeGruy explains that African Americans experience post traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS) and describes it as “300 years of trauma, no help, freed.” With PTSS, we remain faced with racism and discrimination in 2020. Racism is a public health issue that causes mental health issues in African Americans. It is time for us to look inside the village and begin seeking out trained African American counselors to help us unpack our trauma and our feelings.

What I’ve done at St. Mary’s Academy is to introduce mental health counseling as a form of self-love. It

is my life’s mission to ease African Americans into my orange calico counseling chair, into a safe space that is welcoming and peaceful to help them process their hurt and confusion, their grief, their accomplishments, their abuse, their sexuality, their shame and disappointments, their depression, their trauma – in a way that is kind and compassionate and, most importantly, with no judgment. Mental health is as important as physical health. I’ll say it louder for the folks in the back – MENTAL HEALTH IS AS IMPORTANT AS PHYSICAL HEALTH.



(Photo by Tamiko Massey)

Your brain is an organ just like your heart, your kidneys and your liver. If your chest hurts, wouldn’t you go to the doctor and get examined? Maybe you’ll even follow recommendations for better health. Well, your brain deserves the same attention. Sometimes the brain just doesn’t work.

During this pandemic, so many emotions are experienced – anger, fear, anxiety, confusion, profound sadness, loneliness, feelings of inadequacy, loss of appetite, depression, etc. – all of which are normal responses to an abnormal situation. It’s ok to feel these emotions, just don’t sit in them long. Here are a few suggestions to help cope with pandemic blues:

- You are not alone. Stay prayed up.
- Acknowledge your feelings. Don’t sit in them long.
- Find an African American counselor (www.therapyforblackgirls.com, www.cliniciansofcolor.org, www.melaninandmentalhealth.com, www.nimhd.nih.gov for Brother, You’re on My Mind). Many counselors are seeing clients virtually to protect both the client and the counselor.
- Interview the counselor and see if they’re a good fit.
- Attend each session faithfully and be totally transparent. Counseling is a process.
- Mediate each morning recalling your blessings.
- Move more or exercise.
- Do yoga or tai chi (check out YouTube for Yoga/Tai Chi for Beginners)
- Eat a healthy Mediterranean diet which is rich in Omega-3s and good for the brain.
- Stay hydrated with water and green tea. Leave the sugary drinks alone.
- Perform random acts of kindness daily.
- Talk to your doctor if you have the blues. Take prescribed medications or natural supplements.
- Call 911 or the Suicide Prevention Hotline (800-273-8255) if you feel like you want to hurt yourself or hurt someone else.

My prayer for you is that if you are experiencing the pandemic blues, that you will be proactive in addressing your mental health needs. I pray that African Americans will understand the importance of their mental health. I pray that African American counselors will provide the highest standard of mental health care to their brothers and sisters. I pray we can all feel and share the peace God gave us.

Cathy Green-Miner is a licensed professional counselor and owner of Talk Therapy LLC, a private practice dedicated to changing the stigma of mental health in the African American community. She is the recipient of the Humane and Caring Award and the Best of Show Award by the Louisiana Counseling Association. Mrs. Green-Miner is also the recipient of the University of New Orleans Best Internship Award for training practicum and internship students at St. Mary’s Academy in New Orleans. Cathy was videographer for Media Production Center and served on the editorial staff of In a Word for over twenty years.

in a word or two

We again send our congratulations to Wilton Cardinal Gregory. The new Cardinal was elevated to the rank of Cardinal by Pope Francis on November 28 2020. The year 2020 has been a year like no other. However, during this turbulent year an African American was made Cardinal and we rejoice.



Pope Francis finishes presenting a ring and scroll to new Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington during a consistory for the creation of 13 new cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 28, 2020. (CNS photo/Stefano Spaziani, pool)



Jonathan Isaac of the Orlando Magic presents a jersey with his number to Pope Francis during a meeting with a delegation from the National Basketball Players Association at the Vatican Nov. 23, 2020. The group also included Marco Belinelli of the San Antonio Spurs; Sterling Brown of the Milwaukee Bucks; Kyle Korver of the Milwaukee Bucks; and Anthony Tolliver, a free agent who most recently played for the Memphis Grizzlies. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



Pope Francis poses for a photo with a delegation from the National Basketball Players Association during a private audience at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



The Diocese of Brooklyn, NY called the *diocese of immigrants* is temporarily the home of a sculpture depicting the movement of migrants. "Angels Unawares," a replica of the artwork that sits in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, was unveiled Dec. 8 by Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio and placed in front of the diocese's public Christmas tree at Grand Army Plaza. The sculpture sits in place of the traditional Nativity creche in front of the historic Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch. The 35-foot tree is adorned with 14,000 lights, making an impressive site in the middle of Brooklyn's busiest traffic circle. The artwork was designed by Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz and depicts a raft packed with more than 140 migrants and refugees representing the diverse waves of immigration through history. There are Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, a Polish woman running from the communist regime, a Cherokee on the Trail of Tears, an Irish boy escaping the potato famine, and the Holy Family of Nazareth. St. Francis Xavier Cabrini, the patron saint of immigrants and best known as Mother Cabrini, also is depicted in the sculpture. Bishop DiMarzio, an international expert on migration policy, called it "a symbol of what we want to be, what we have been in the past and what the future holds for us if we hold to our values as Americans." (CNS photo/Ed Wilkinson, The Tablet)

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida and Arkansas.

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