

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



CARLOS T. CARTER

Mental Health

This month's Take Charge of Your Health Today is about the mental health crisis and the important role our communities play in helping people recognize and understand what good mental health looks and feels like, so they can reach their full potential. Good mental health is a human right! Programs that promote it for all people should be part of our country's infrastructure — not only for this generation, but also the next.

As we do each month, we asked President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, Carlos T. Carter, for his input:

Q: Carlos, we know the Urban League places great importance on the theme of empowerment in all its programming. What does it mean to be empowered? How might mental health affect an individual's ability to achieve empowerment?

Carlos: We view "empowerment" as having agency or power in a situation. Empowered individuals are put in the position to create a life that is meaningful to them and not just respond to others' wishes. They are put in the driver's seat to make decisions that are important to them and their family. They are in more of a position of choice rather than "fight or flight" and a victim of circumstance. They are positioned to overcome, rise above challenges to pursue their dreams, and realize their life's purpose. At the end of the day, as an empowered person, you are positioned to realize your full potential.

Your mental health is paramount to your success and ability to reach your highest potential. A key ingredient to success is hard work. Another element is having a mindset where you believe in yourself and believe that you can win. Unfortunately, when you are struggling with your mental health, it is very difficult to realize your potential. I believe everything starts with your mind and thoughts. Yes, you can fake that you have it all together — but for only so long. For this reason, mental health, and having a good mindset, form the foundation of empowerment.

Q: What is a trauma-informed lens and how does it characterize the Urban League's work?

Carlos: A trauma-informed lens is about being aware of the impact trauma has on the lives of everyone. This is further amplified for Black and Brown people who are disproportionately impacted by systemic racism and the generational trauma it has caused. Both are devastating to our mental health without the proper treatment or support.

At the Urban League, most of our direct service staff have received training in using a trauma-informed approach. This is evident through our service delivery, as well as the skills imparted to our clients regarding practicing self-care to reduce personal stress and maintain mental sharpness. We take this very seriously as we work with our clients to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Q: What can we do on an individual and a community level to break the stigma around seeking mental health treatment?

Carlos: I believe it's important that we're intentional in normalizing that it's ok not to be ok! I personally have had several periods in my life where things were tough and I needed additional support. I talk about this in my book *Greatness Awaits You!* It was not easy to be this vulnerable, but I talk about it to help other people. Sharing personal experiences and modeling the way by seeking help myself goes a long way.

Another thing I've found to be very helpful is really listening and being concerned about other people. When people know that you really care about them non-judgmentally, they will often open up and share what's really going on. Men of all ages especially struggle with this. I've been able to encourage many to seek professional help for the first time by simply showing genuine concern. I constantly let them know that it is okay to seek help because I've done it, too.

As a community, we need to raise awareness about the importance of taking care of our mental health and let each other know about resources. We must do it in a way that is empowering and preserves one's dignity.

We also need to be creative and leverage nontraditional advocates like barbers, stylists, and others who can build trust and connect with people who are hard to reach through traditional methods.



Fighting mental illness stigma and restoring equity on a community level

One thing that keeps people from seeking mental health treatment is stigma. Stigma happens when people have negative or unfair beliefs, attitudes, or judgments about a group of people. The judgments are based on qualities the group has. For example, there are stigmas about mental illness, HIV/AIDS, religion, gender, and sexuality. These beliefs can lead to discrimination, prejudice, and unfair treatment.

Two types of mental health stigma Stigma is created by people in every society and there are two types: Public and internalized. Public stigma happens, for example, when a person decides against seeking mental health treatment because they're afraid someone will think they're "crazy."

Internalized stigma is more complicated and harder to overcome. For example, a woman who is suffering from symptoms of depression mistakes them for stress and begins to believe they're just part of her personality.

Dr. Charlotte Brown, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Health and Community Systems at the University of Pittsburgh, studies stigma and its impact on mental health.

"We know from our research that public stigma — thankfully — doesn't always stop people from seeking treatment for mental illnesses, such as depression," she explains. "However, internalized stigma



DR. CHARLOTTE BROWN

does negatively impact people's attitudes toward treatment. The more internalized stigma a person has, the less likely they may be to seek help."

The power of treating people where they live

Dr. Brown's research shows that an effective way to fight stigma and achieve mental health equity in underserved communities is to make mental health resources available in neighborhoods through partnerships with non-mental health agencies. This includes social service organizations, co-ops, and clinics. In these familiar settings, mental health practitioners collaborate with community organizations — and everyone benefits.

For example, in an early collaboration with the Alma Ilery Health Center in Homewood, Dr. Brown and her team approached Black women elders who agreed to receive training to be peer mental health educators. She explains, "The training included how to identify depression, how to approach people and talk to them non-judgmentally, how to safeguard their privacy, and how to inform them about services and encourage them to seek help."

Dr. Brown's research happened at a time when community-based collaboration was a new approach in Pittsburgh. "What we learned then was that when a trusted neighbor is concerned about your mental health, you're more inclined to engage with that person. You respect them for their life experience, their relatability, and their genuine concern for you."

Compassionate, humble peer support Dr. Brown's research has contributed to the understanding that successful community-based approaches can ease our country's mental health crisis, particularly for underserved people — but only if the care they offer is authentic.

"Community-based mental health programs work well in helping people overcome stigma — but only when the work is done with compassion and humility," she says. "When someone truly take an interest in you, you feel it, and are more open to the idea of getting help."

Black-led Steel Smiling centers importance of Black mental health in Pittsburgh region

Steel Smiling, a Black-led, Pittsburgh-based non-profit, connects residents to Black-specific mental health support through education, advocacy, and awareness.

Founded in 2015, Steel Smiling has since co-created a pilot program with Neighborhood Allies called the Organization-in-Residence model. The program is designed to promote Steel Smiling's growth as a young organization by strengthening its non-profit practices and policies and sharing important resources with its partner.

The program also allows Steel Smiling to grow more strategically, as they continue to help Black Pittsburghers find their own pathways to healing and wellness.

This mutually beneficial relationship is helping Steel Smiling reach its 2030 goal of ensuring that every Black person in Allegheny County has at least one positive mental health experience that improves their quality of life.

Steel Smiling's Programs: Beams to Bridges and Steel Healing

Steel Smiling's flagship program Beams to Bridges is a six-month community-based course that provides 50 hours of comprehensive mental health training and education to residents.

Upon completion of the program, graduates are equipped to serve as community mental health advocates. These community members not only take good care of themselves, but also know how to help their neighbors identify and seek support for a variety of mental health needs ranging from trauma, substance use and recovery, grief and loss, and more.

Steel Healing, the organization's other well-known initiative, connects community members to culturally aligned treatment options and supports. The program combines wellness navigation services, peer support, and financial as-



sistance to ensure Black community members have access to culturally appropriate care that is their birthright. It also makes several affinity support groups available for residents to heal together in community.

Learn more about Steel Smiling. Call or email the organization at 412.248.0253 or info@steelsmilingpgh.org.



BEAMS TO BRIDGES MEETING

Better manage your moods and improve mental health with mindfulness meditation

How much time do you spend each day thinking and rethinking about what's happened in the past? Or what may or may not happen in the future? Do you wish you spent more time calmly living in the moment — observing, not judging?

Intentionally focusing on what's happening right now — without trying to change or control it — is called mindfulness. Mindfulness can help adults and children regulate their moods and manage and control their emotions in a way that improves daily life and contributes to mental and physical health.

Mindfulness benefits include coping with stress and challenges in a healthier way, thinking more clearly and making better, less impulsive decisions. Mindfulness can also enhance relationships and boost a person's ability to concentrate.

Strengthening your brain's attention muscle

One of the most effective ways to become more mindful is to train your brain by meditating. Dr. Danella Hafemen, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh, studies brain function and moods among children and adolescents, including teaching them how to meditate using simple techniques.

"Meditation is the training gym for mindfulness," she explains. "It can help to strengthen the brain's attention muscle."

In one of Dr. Hafemen's pilot studies, children, aged 11-14, who were at risk for developing bipolar disorder, participated in 8-week mindfulness meditation training interventions. The goal was to see if the training caused brain and clinical changes.



YOUNG MAN MEDITATING — GETTY IMAGES STOCK PHOTO

After the study ended, researchers, children, and parents noted positive results, including less moodiness and anxiety and better emotion regulation.

Dr. Hafemen's results mirror other larger studies on mindfulness and mental health for children and adults. In one, researchers reviewed 200+ studies of mindfulness among healthy people and found meditation training especially good at reducing stress, anxiety, and depression.

Accept and observe your thoughts
According to Dr. Hafemen, it's important to think about mindfulness as having two parts: Attention and acceptance. "For example, in breathing meditation you're intentionally focusing on the in-and-out of your

breath for a set period of time," she explains.

"As soon as you notice you've become distracted by random thoughts — and this happens to all meditators — bring your attention back to your breath and accept the distraction. Don't judge it. Just observe it," she continues. "It's natural for your mind to wander. Don't react or respond. Just re-focus on your breathing."

Free and low-cost ways to begin meditating

There's never been a better time to teach yourself (and help your children) to meditate, thanks to free and low-cost apps, podcasts, and videos on YouTube and via streaming services.

One of Dr. Hafemen's favorite free apps for children and adults is Smiling Mind. She also recommends guided meditation by Sebene Selassie, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg, as well as self-compassion exercises by Kristin Neff and Ten Percent Happier podcasts.

"Meditation is an immediate, low-cost way to improve your mental health," says Dr. Hafemen. "It doesn't require anything other than your willingness to find a quiet space each day and a spend a small amount of time noticing your body and mind, feeling your breath, and being kind to yourself. In return, you may become a little bit happier. After a while, you may also notice that regular meditation helps make day-to-day challenges easier, too."



DR. DANELLA HAFEMEN

To heal and thrive in this generation and the next, champion your mental health

According to the CDC, mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions

in our country. While mental health conditions happen to Black Americans at about the same or less frequency as White Americans, being Black means greater trauma and violence, which takes its toll on adults and youth emotionally and mentally.

Systemic/structural and institutional racism also lead to inequities in getting mental health care. Mistrust in the medical system is a barrier, too. So is a shortage of trained mental health professionals (especially for children and youth), along with the stigma of mental illness.

All these factors and others have led to a mental health crisis. But to Dr. Toya Jones, Black people have always been in the thick of it.

Dr. Jones is the University of Pittsburgh's Bachelor of Arts in Social Work Program Director and Assistant Professor. For 20+ years, she's been helping children and families impacted by violence and working with incarcerated and returning citizens who've been affected by crime.

"Black people in this country have been deserving of therapy for our entire existence in this country, due to post-traumatic slave disorder," she says. "Traditionally, we attend counseling sessions with our aunts, mamas, and grandmamas. We talk to our pastors and rely on prayer and faith to get us through tough emotional times."

Sometimes, however, these informal counseling sessions and inner strength are not enough — especially when someone's life is affected by unresolved trauma that robs them of their joy. "It's important to understand that seeking professional help is a sign of strength," Dr. Jones says. "It's how we heal our hurt and set an example for our youth."

What is trauma?
According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or murder. Right after the event, people may be in shock or denial. Later, they can experience flashbacks, unpredictable emotions, and difficult relationships, as well as headaches and stomach issues. Unresolved trauma can also play a part in high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease.

Trauma shapes mental and physical health

Trauma doesn't go away and it won't be silenced. If it's not healed, it can cause deep physical and emotional suffering for the victim, their family, and friends — including their children. "By not healing your trauma, your kids see the world through events that have happened to you."

Healing begins with knowledge
Trauma doesn't have to be a life sentence. Dr. Jones' research shows that simply knowing why your brain signaled your body to react to a terrible event the way you did can lower trauma symptoms and allow your brain to calm down and think more clearly.



DR. TOYA JONES

For example, the body responds to a traumatic event by fighting, flying or freezing. "Say there's a shooting on the street," Dr. Jones explains. "One person runs in the opposite direction of the shooter. That's flight. Another person stops in the middle of the street and can't move. That's freezing. Another person charges the shooter. That's the fight response."

These responses happen automatically. Once you understand why you froze in the middle of the street, for example, you can begin to process how the resulting trauma is having a negative effect

on your daily life and what you can do to heal it.

How to find the right therapist — with or without insurance

When seeking therapy, Dr. Jones reassures readers there are Black therapists who can help. She also notes the importance of finding a therapist who has experience in your type of trauma. "Interview potential therapists by asking a lot of questions," she says.

For example, has the therapist worked with PTSD-related conditions? Do they have experience with domestic violence, rape, or homicide? Do they work with children, adults, older populations, or veterans? Is their focus on depression or anxiety or eating disorders? "You also want to know about the therapist's education, training, and background," Dr. Jones adds.

If you receive Medicaid or don't have insurance, know that survivors of violent crime are entitled to free counseling through the PA Victims Compensation Assistance Program. Veterans, too, have free resources and support through the VA as do children and adolescents. Pennsylvania also offers mental health resources for people without insurance and for people whose insurance is lacking.

"Mental health is a human right and all people should have equal access to prevention, treatment, and support," Dr. Jones reminds us.

Listen to Dr. Jones' podcast "Healing Overflow."

Visible Hands Collaborative helps Pittsburghers overcome mental health challenges in a warm, welcoming environment

In Pittsburgh, the Visible Hands Collaborative serves as a first line of defense in mental health support.

The organization uses Integrative Community Therapy (ICT) to ease mental health-care issues. ICT was born in a "favela" or shanty town in Brazil. It's made for communities that are under great stress. As such, it's an accessible, effective method that doesn't rely on referrals, doctors, insurance, or wait lists, and offers immediate, no-cost access to any person needing mental health support.

With ICT, people come to-



gether in a community to talk and share their thoughts and feelings. This interaction helps people understand and deal with life's daily challenges by discussing them with others in a supportive environment.

The goal is to promote healing, understanding, and well-being through group discussions and

shared experiences that are guided by skilled moderators.

Each ICT session includes five parts: Welcoming, voting on the session's topics, framing the chosen topic individually and as a group, sharing (without giving advice), and a closing ritual, such as prayer.

The value of this circular

sharing is different than treatment that's imparted from the top down by an "authority." Instead, participants come together as equals, each of whom has a broad and diverse range of knowledge and experiences. Participants own their stories and knowledge and, as a result, feel more capable of facing

their problems and rebuilding and reintegrating their broken networks.

Visit the VHC website to learn more about the organization and its methods. If you're interested in joining a Tuesday night Zoom session, visit the website and click on "Contact" at the top of the landing page. Fill out the form. In the "How can we help or work together?" section, include a message that you would like to receive a link for the Tuesday night demonstration ICTs.