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Depression Among African Americans

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Abstract: ***Depression disproportionately affects African Americans and is often intensified by socioeconomic hardship, social isolation, and barriers to accessing mental healthcare. Cultural stigma surrounding mental illness and distrust of traditional mental health services further reduce the likelihood that individuals will seek treatment. This paper examines the role of black Christian churches as third places that foster social connection and explores how these institutions can help address depression within black communities. Drawing on research from public health, psychology, sociology, and human geography, this study argues that churches provide protective benefits through social support, religious coping, and trusted community relationships. The paper also considers limitations, including spiritual struggles and negative congregational experiences, which may reduce the mental health benefits of religious participation. Ultimately, the evidence suggests that integrating evidence-based mental health services into black churches can reduce stigma, improve access to care, and strengthen existing community support systems. By combining spiritual guidance with professional mental healthcare, black churches can serve as effective partners in reducing depressive symptoms and improving mental health outcomes among African Americans.***

Keywords: Depression, Third places, Faith-based interventions; Health disparities

1. Introduction

Depression is a mental disorder which plagues around 20% of the American population. It is characterized by episodes of deep sadness, social isolation, fatigue, and unmotivation. The National Center for Health Statistics, the primary health statistic agency for the CDC, reports that 10% of African Americans live with depression. This number is theorized to be underreported since this demographic is less likely to report their symptoms and seek medical attention, but they also tend to have more intense cases (National Center for Health Statistics 2). Depression among African Americans is often attributed to a lack of economic stability and emotional distress due to social conflicts. This particular demographic often has poor access to medical treatment, and solutions are often sought out in religious settings where symptoms may be misunderstood.

Research by human geography researcher Dr. Jennifer Ferreira has demonstrated that third places such as churches serve as important spaces for fostering social connection, an important tool in the fight against depression (Ferreira 9). The Office of the Surgeon General of the U.S., the official source of public health information in the U.S., demonstrates this correlation further, with its finding that social connection reduces the risk of depression in individuals predisposed to the disorder (Office of the Surgeon General 29). They also demonstrated that in people of all ages, social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of depression and anxiety.

The purpose of this research is to address the intensity of depression among black people, and how it can be dealt with. The issue of depression among African Americans in the U.S. can be mitigated by utilizing Christian churches as third places where African Americans can build social connections and become educated on the various evidence-based methods for fighting depression.

2. Background

The black community is a group that is especially vulnerable to developing depression. The Vice Chair of Psychiatry at the Icahn School of Medicine, Sidney Hankerson, presents that The main causes of depression in the black community included a number of socioeconomic problems and interpersonal relationship issues including financial difficulties, unstable employment, and broken family systems (Hankerson et al. 690). Black communities often face poor living conditions when compared to other racial groups, and this contributes to the high levels of emotional distress felt throughout this group. The assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University, Briana Richardson, came to a similar conclusion. “Poverty and violence were the main sources of emotional distress among study participants from a Black church in Philadelphia, reflecting the reality of many socioeconomically disadvantaged urban black communities in the United States (1–3, 7)” (Richardson et al. 744). This displays that environmental trauma plays a significant role in the mental health of many black individuals.

The lack of control of their environment is the main cause of this stress, with sociology professors Sun Joon Jang and Bryon R. Johnson noting that “people of low socioeconomic status...are likely to be distressed because they tend to lack a sense of control and social support” (Jang and Johnson 249). Additionally, the rates at which healthcare is provided to people with depression in this particular community is low because of the stigma associated with seeking medical care for mental health. The cultural norm of hiding emotional distress and regarding people that seek mental help as weak contributes to the low participation of black people in mental health services (Richardson et al. 745). This locks many members of the black community into an unpleasant cycle where their want for medical attention causes them to be looked down upon by their peers, worsening their depressive state and further increasing their need for medical attention. This cultural belief is worse for black men than it is for black women.

Black men face higher stress from financial, occupational, and legal events due to higher unemployment and incarceration rates (Hankerson et al. 532). Despite this they are often underrepresented in mental health centers. This can be attributed to the belief that mental health services are ill

equipped to their needs or the belief that using these services is an admission of weakness. With African Americans often facing harsher living conditions but also being less open to accepting traditional treatments for mental health conditions, there is a great need for an appealing treatment option.

3. Discussion

3.1 Importance of Religion

While black populations tend to avoid traditional mental health services, churches are areas where black people form social bonds and can use their religious beliefs to cope with the stress in their lives. Tyler Vanderweele, a public health professor at Harvard, noted that religious people tend to be less distressed because they have a better sense of control, better social support, and can find meaning in their suffering which leads to a greater sense of purpose in their lives (Vanderweele 478-479). The notion that God will guide them in their daily lives and that justice will be served to all are examples of beliefs that help regulate the mental states of African Americans living in tough areas. This helps them feel in control and supported, two very important qualities in preventing depressive symptoms. They also feel purpose in their pain, an outlook that increases a person's quality of life. Vanessa Brooks, a leadership scientist who specializes in the relationship between the black church and mental health, presents a similar finding. In Brooks' study of how religion affects mental health among black Christians, she found that all of the participants used religious coping to manage their mental health, and this included praying, scripture reading, and various healing rituals (Brooks 162). From these findings it can be concluded that religion is an important tool in the fight against depression.

3.2 Benefits of Religion

The benefits of having these types of beliefs are apparent. Psychology professor Michael McCullough and religious professor David Larson found that people who are frequently involved in religious activities and hold their religion in a high regard "are at substantially reduced risk of depressive disorder and depressive symptoms. They also appear to recover more quickly from depressive episodes and are less likely to become depressed over time" (McCullough and Larson 134). These findings illustrate how religiosity can be a powerful factor in determining how depression will affect a person. Behavioral science and psychiatry professor Harold Koenig also remarks that "there is ample evidence that R/S- because it facilitates coping and imbues negative events with meaning and purpose- is related to better mental health (less depression, lower stress, less anxiety, greater well-being, and more positive emotions)" (Koenig 12).

Religion is proactive in its ability to reduce emotional distress and provide people going through negative situations with a source of strength. While there are various benefits of organized religion in black churches, the small collection of negative associations must also be addressed.

3.3 Correlation between Religion and Mental Health

Although religious beliefs are an important reason why there is a positive correlation between religiosity and mental health, the social aspect of black Christian churches is also important. Third spaces are areas separate from work and home places and serve as spaces where people can relax and socialise (Ferreira et al. 9). Although this does include traditional church services such as Sunday mass, it also includes secondary activities such as prayer groups and food festivals. This type of socialization is important in fighting depressive symptoms. Research has shown that social behaviors are associated with a 15% decrease in developing depression among people who are already high risk" (Office of the Surgeon General 29). The fellowship aspects of these churches help attract African Americans who want to practice their faith among like minded individuals.

Additionally, there is an element of trust in these black Churches which may be the reason that these resources are considered before traditional mental health resources. Branden Born is an associate professor of urban design and planning at the University of Washington. According to his analysis, "African American churches, in particular, were noted for being more likely to provide economic development services such as housing, credit unions, and job training to the community than their white counterparts [10,11,15,17]." (Born et al. 5)

Community-centered activities like these help African Americans develop a sense of trust with these organizations, and they are more likely to engage with these types of organizations if they need mental health support. There are also negative associations between religion and mental health when religion is approached in certain ways. "Conversely, people who are involved in religion for reasons of self-interest are at a decidedly higher risk for depressive symptoms" (McCullough and Larson 134). When religious beliefs are more self-centered than community centered, depressive symptoms are higher. This suggests that the community aspect has much influence on the ability of churches to support mental health.

There is also evidence that spiritual struggles may be detrimental to the mental health of congregants. Evidence suggests that Christians in areas where they are the minority are more likely to attempt suicide or self-harm (Vanderweele 479). "Spiritual struggles have also been shown to be associated longitudinally with worse health (Pargament et al., 2004), and negative congregational interactions are associated with lower measures of well-being (Ellison, Zhang, Krause, & Marcum, 2009)" (Vanderweele 479). Instances where congregants may be struggling to understand their faith in relation to certain issues or when they may have had a negative experience with other people in their same community result in more emotional distress. The possibility for negative interpretations must be considered carefully when treating Christians of this particular group.

In both of these scenarios, the community aspect of church attendance is left out, and the consequences are apparent. The first instance is when people try to practice their religion on their own. In the second instance, spiritual struggles foster

negative emotions among a person. Normally, these are dealt with by seeking help from peers or a spiritual director. When they become cut off, the internal conflict intensifies and damages their mental health. While these scenarios both show that community is a large part of why church participation is beneficial, it has been shown that church participation has a stronger effect on mental health than other community activities. This suggests that there is a sort of synergistic effect taking place during religious participation, where the beliefs combined with the community benefits one's mental health.

4. Conclusion

Although religious beliefs are an important reason why there is a positive correlation between religiosity and mental health, the social aspect of black, Chrisitan churches is also important. Third spaces are areas separate from work and home places and serve as spaces where people can relax and socialise (Ferreira et al. 9). Although this does include traditional church services such as Sunday mass, it also includes secondary activities such as prayer groups and food festivals. This type of socialization is important in fighting depressive symptoms. Research has shown that social behaviors are associated with a 15% decrease in developing depression among people who are already high risk" (Office of the Surgeon General 29). The fellowship aspect of these churches helps attract African Americans who want to practice their faith among like minded individuals.

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