The Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) Project

Contents

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Black Men and Mental Health – The Reality

The media's coverage of George Floyd's death in 2020, the increasing number of police shootings of unarmed Black men, the disproportionate impact of COVID19 on communities of color, and other social injustices highlight the tensions associated with race, gender, and class that affect the lives of Black men. While social injustices frequently impact marginalized groups in the United States, young Black men continue to be targeted by systems of power, oppression, and inequity.

Black men face barriers embedded in society's structural systems that contribute to unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Despite their numerous benefits, not even college enrollment, matriculation, and graduation can protect Black men from experiencing racism, discrimination, and unfair stereotypes and facing significant cultural and social hardships. For Black men aged 18 to 30, social and economic stressors are often compounded by the challenges of transitioning to young adulthood. There are often challenges associated with independence, housing, identity, family role, and social relationships, contributing to stress for these men (Bowman, 1989; Coll et al., 1996; Dowd, 2016; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Lindsey & Xiao, 2019; Rowling, 2006; Watkins, 2012). The transition to young adulthood is also a time when young Black men experience cultural stressors related to deeply held beliefs about manhood and what it means to be a man. There are expectations for Black men to conform to traditional norms of masculinity to prove their manhood despite their stressors. The accumulation of these stressors places young Black men at risk for poor mental health.

Black men who struggle to define their own manhood, particularly at the intersection of society's defintions of manhood and mental health, often suffer in private. They avoid seeking treatment for fear of the stigma surrounding mental illness in the Black community. This is because mental health challenges are often perceived as a sign of weakness and rarely discussed in Black communities. Treatment for mental illness may also conflict with beliefs about race and gender norms. The stigma surrounding mental illness in the Black community combined with cultural beliefs about masculinity discourages Black men from seeking the care and support they need for their mental health challenges (Clement et al., 2015; Griffith et al., 2011; Lindsey et al., 2010, Watkins 2012).

A Call to Action: Mental Health Programs for Young Black Men

Programs, policies, and interventions sensitive to race, culture, and gender are needed to improve young Black men's mental health and well-being. Mental health resources and services that address Black men's complex mental health challenges are few; however, there is a promising future for improved mental health treatment for Black men due to a growing body of research. The American Psychological Association (APA) recently revised its guidelines for treating men with mental health challenges (American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018). The guidelines acknowledge the racial, cultural, and social stressors Black men face and how these stressors influence Black men's mental health. The revised guidelines also acknowledge Black men's multiple masculine identities and how different life experiences affect their mental health. Acknowledgment and adoption of these considerations will help practitioners shape individual treatment plans and improve mental health outcomes for Black men.

The Value of Social Support Groups for Black Men

Men who participate in social groups have better health status, coping behaviors, quality of life, and well-being (Cooper et al., 2013). Studies have reported positive outcomes from Internet-based support groups; most notably they decrease depression over the life span (Oh et al., 2014).

The use of Internet-based social support groups has increased dramatically over the past decade. The anonymity and confidentiality features they offer have increased the number of men who utilize these groups. Internet support groups are self-help in nature and are generally accessible at all times for anonymous mental health support. For Black men, this setup creates a convenient, safe, and private space for discussions about culturally sensitive topics. Black men who have participated in these intimate discussions report:

- a more positive outlook,
- increased confidence,
- stronger social relationships, and
- a healthier, more progressive understanding of manhood.

Research suggests Black men benefit from participating in Internet-based social support groups for several reasons:

- the Internet is a familiar and acceptable communication tool;
- there are opportunities for self-disclosure when discussing stigmatizing topics related to mental health;
- the anonymity of the Internet encourages honesty and creates intimacy and positive relationships among participants; and
- unlike traditional face-to-face mental health therapy, online support allows for more time to think about responses before sharing them.

The Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) Project:
A Social Support Program for Black College Men

Using popular social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), the YBMen project provides mental health education and social support for young Black men in an anonymous, safe, and nonthreatening environment. The YBMen project offers Black men an opportunity to engage other Black men in discussions about their social pressures, especially pressures about their mental health, manhood, and life experiences.

With the goal of reducing mental health stigma and improving access to mental health resources for Black men, Dr. Daphne C. Watkins, Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan, developed the award-winning YBMen project to educate young Black men about ways to improve their mental health, adopt more progressive definitions of manhood, and increase social support. "The YBMen project is meant to engage Black men in discussions about popular culture references and social media content that directly challenges their previous notions about mental health, manhood, and social support," Watkins said. "If our participants expand their thinking about the intersection of mental health, manhood, and social support as a result of our program, then we have achieved our goal." In 2014, Dr. Watkins launched the YBMen project at Jackson College with 30 Black male students. Findings from this pilot program demonstrated reduced depressive symptoms, more progressive definitions of manhood, and increased social support for participants.

Since its 2014 launch, the YBMen project has reached roughly 500 young Black men, with over 150 participating in the social media-based program. Plans are underway to adapt the program for Michigan middle schools, high schools, and other colleges and universities worldwide.

> " *If our participants expand their thinking about the intersection of mental health, manhood, and social support as a result of our program, then we have achieved our goal.* "

Dr. Daphne C. Watkins
*YBMen Project Founding Director and Professor of Social Work,
University of Michigan*

How YBMen Works

The YBMen project is a 2- to 12-week program, but the length and content are adapted to fit the partnering campuses' needs. Young Black men are recruited with the help of our campus partners. During recruitment, participants complete an interview and survey before enrolling in the program. Responses from the interview and survey help reveal their perceptions of manhood, social support, and mental health. After enrolling, the men join an adapted, private YBMen social media group and begin weekly educational modules on mental health, manhood, social support, and other topics selected by the YBMen team and campus partners. Discussions are focused on group problem-solving, action planning, and individual decision-making. At the end of the program, participants complete a post-program interview and survey about their experience. Participants' interview and survey responses are compared to assess changes to their mental health, perceptions of manhood, and social support over time (i.e., before the program started vs. after the program ended).

The YBMen Project at Michigan State University

Michigan State University (MSU) administrators are committed to improving the lives and well-being of Black male students on campus. They were seeking ways to create a campus environment in which Black male students could thrive, so in 2017, MSU and the YBMen project team partnered and created a program for their Black male students.

Michigan State University is a top public research institution in the United States and is the second-largest university in Michigan. MSU is the nation's premier Land Grant University and offers more than 200 academic programs, with 34 programs nationally ranked in the top 25. Located in East Lansing, MSU enrolled approximately 50,000 students (including undergraduate, graduate, and professional) in the fall of 2020. Of the total MSU student body, about 38,000 are undergraduate students. Enrollment for undergraduate students of color in the fall of 2020 was roughly 25% of the domestic student total, yielding MSU's most diverse student population to date.
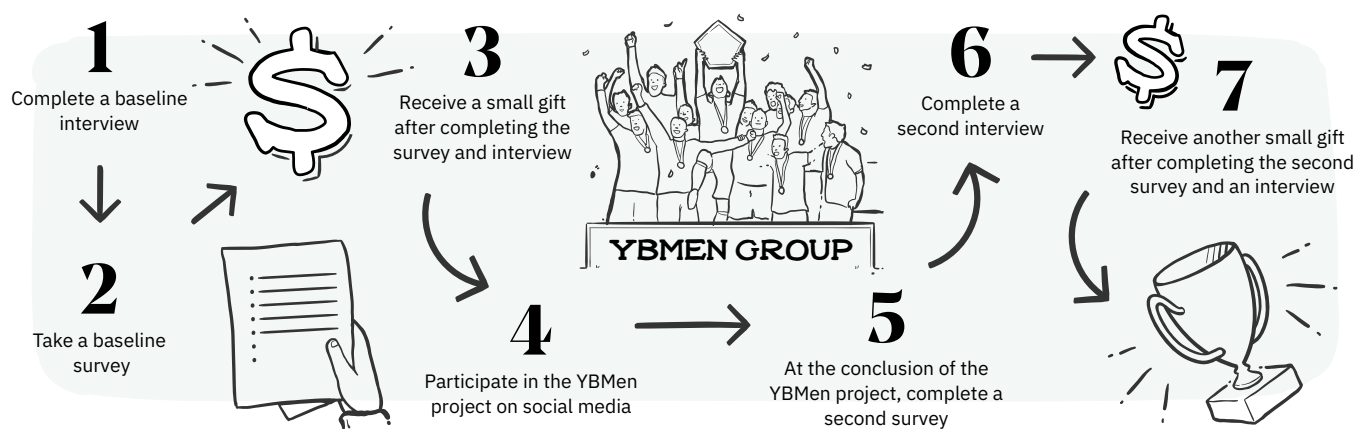
The YBMen Action Plan at MSU

The YBMen action plan at MSU consisted of the following elements: recruitment efforts and incentives, surveys and interviews, and the intervention groups.

YBMen project participants were recruited using a two-phase approach. With support from the YBMen team, MSU administrators sent an email announcement about the YBMen project to all Black male students inviting them to participate in the program. Next, YBMen team members visited the MSU campus several times to recruit Black male students in person. The team set up tables in common spaces during each visit and discussed the project's eligibility criteria with passersby. They also handed out fliers around campus and placed fliers on tables at other MSU events. All of the recruitment efforts helped generate an extensive list of eligible Black men, to which the

YBMen team sent an invitation to complete the YBMen survey. Black male students previously diagnosed with mental health disorders were not eligible to participate in the YBMen project.

In total, the YBMen team completed 34 interviews and collected 178 surveys from Black male students at MSU. Of these, 47.2% of participants who completed the survey were first-generation students, 31.4% were married or had significant others, 88.7% were straight/heterosexual, 2.2% were homosexual, and 3.9% were bisexual. The diversity of our sample is reflective of the diversity of MSU.

This figure shows the tasks our Black male participants carried out as part of the action plan at MSU:

1 Complete a baseline interview

2 Take a baseline survey

3 Receive a small gift after completing the survey and interview

4 Participate in the YBMen project on social media

YBMEN GROUP

5 At the conclusion of the YBMen project, complete a second survey

6 Complete a second interview

7 Receive another small gift after completing the second survey and an interview

As indicated in steps 1 and 2 of the YBMen action plan (see figure above), Black male students who completed a baseline interview or survey received a small gift of appreciation (step 3). At MSU, after completing the survey, 19 Black male students opted into the YBMen social media program (step 4). We created four private Facebook groups, and the groups met for five weeks. Our team posted in the YBMen Facebook groups several times a week using our adapted program manual, and participants responded by commenting on the posted material.

We shared educational content about mental health, manhood, social support, and more over the course

of the five weeks. Each week's topic corresponded to specific weekly goals, participants' knowledge and awareness of Black men's mental health, manhood, and the need for social support. At the conclusion of the YBMen project, the Black male students completed a second survey (step 5) and a second interview (step 6). These pre- and post-interviews provided our team with insights into Black college men's experiences and thoughts about the YBMen project overall. After the second survey and second interview, participants received a second small gift (step 7).

The Impact of the YBMen Project at MSU

The YBMen project demonstrated that participants valued having shared private "space" with other Black male students. They also appreciated the relatable content posted in the Facebook group, and they became more aware of differing perspectives on manhood, mental health, and social support throughout the program. Men appreciated being encouraged to communicate and respond to one another, and they valued the contributions of other group members. The group problem-solving process encouraged conversation around mental health, masculine norms, and positive social support outcomes. At the end of the five-week program, the outcomes from the post-program interviews and surveys were positive and indicated:

- progressive definitions and perceptions of manhood,
- decreased symptoms of depression and
- positive attitudes about social support.

More Progressive Masculine Norms (CMNI)

Fewer Depression Symptoms (GMDS, PHQ-9)

More Positive Attitudes About Social Support (ISEL)

DEFINITIONS:

The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI) examines an individual's conformity to masculine norms.

The Gotland Male Depression Scale (GMDS) measures depression symptoms in males.

The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) measures depression symptoms and severity.

The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) is an assessment instrument measuring perceived availability of social support.

What MSU Participants Said About YBMen

Black men benefited from participating in the YBMen project. Here's what two participants had to say about the program itself:

"… the actual program and tryin' to spread awareness about mental health to Black men, I think it's, like, really good. And the way you're doin' it is actually—it's nice to be able to actually talk to people."

"…I felt like it was definitely a safe space. It's definitely a safe space where you could kinda talk about our ideas as Black men at MSU: [and] our opinions on things without judgment, without backlash. Because this was a private group, only we could see what we were sayin'. It kinda, just, felt good, and…it kind of showed me what having a social support group would be like…"

YBMen is helpful because everybody can benefit from having a support group with whom they can share health problems:

"If you go talk to a therapist, you're automatically crazy. Automatically. No matter what you went to talk to him for, you're crazy. Um, and, so, yeah. So, I feel like most, they just don't talk about it…"

"Once you lose that support and you come out here [college], it's just like. It's a drop-off and that's what is. Probably feel like everybody [Black men] getting lost out here."

"Like we've already been through so much physically, we can't show up mentally neither, cause we have to be twice as better than the other races, academically and physically, and when you throw in mentally, then we gotta be three times better, so we can just fit in."

Having this safe space allowed participants to explore common issues from different perspectives:

"I feel like mental health is a really serious problem. I think it's a bigger problem on this campus than people realize, just because a lot of people don't wanna talk about it."

"Overall, I think the topics are really great: It wasn't so formal that I felt like I had to have the perfect answer every time."

"…we actually had valuable discussions…sometimes we weren't as active as we were supposed to be, they would kind of, like, push as us to, uh, share our thoughts, which was good because, um, a lot of times people who weren't that active, when they were pushed to share the thoughts, they actually ended up contributing really good, uh, things to the group posts, and,… videos that were shared. So, yeah, I really enjoyed it."

YBMen led to an increased awareness of masculinity, depression, and mental health:

"…in Black communal spaces for Black men in particular, the ways we're, like, demonized on or represented in media, the ways that we're portrayed… you can see us glorified in negative ways…—whether you wanna talk about hip-hop or whether you wanna talk about, like, in the porn industry, or, like, in just movies in general…Black men have to deal with their, like, people's conceptions of their masculinity is very much unique than other men of color in general."

"I think that you absolutely need places to vent and to, you know, to feel your emotions and to feel your feelings, especially for Black men. Right? We're often taught that we, kinda, have to be strong and, again, do it by ourselves, but having a strong form of support, especially social support from a friend, I think makes it a lot more crucial for Black men to have spaces where they can just be vulnerable. They can just feel their feelings and, really just, be an open book, to some extent."

Summary

Participating in the YBMen project is a way for Black college men to access educational information about mental health, manhood, and social support as they navigate life's twists and turns during their transitions to and throughout college. The private, social media platform allows them to use a medium that is already a part of their lifestyles. Private online groups are used to share mental health education, create intimacy, and nurture positive relationships among the participants, as well as promote progressive definitions of manhood and provide social support. Participating in the YBMen project also increases mental health literacy and informs Black college men's decisions to seek formal mental health services in the future. For the Black male students at MSU, rates of depression symptoms significantly decreased, ideas around masculinities expanded, and the men wanted the program to continue beyond five weeks. We hope the success of YBMen at MSU can inform program and policy decisions at MSU to support resources for future cohorts of Black male students.

Recommendations for Campus Partners

Below are recommendations for our MSU campus partners and service providers to consider when developing programs and services that aim to improve Black college men's success.

Be specific

Create programming and services that are customized to Black men on your campus.

Involve Black men

Do not exclude Black men from the decision-making process. Involve them in developing the programs and services you plan to offer on your campus.

Create online communities

Leverage social media and technology as a preliminary step toward helping Black men improve their mental health and college experiences. Black men may be more willing to seek additional help with their challenges if they first explore them using tools they are comfortable with, such as social media.

One size does not fit all

Create specialized affinity groups for Black men, such as LGBTQ+ groups, religious groups, first-generation student groups, or groups for academic majors. Remember, there is diversity among Black men in today's society, so do not defer to stereotypes.

Normalize it

Consider making mental health and wellness services part of campus orientation, especially for Black college men. Invite Black men who have experienced and overcome mental health challenges to share their health journeys and treatment experiences.

Make it easy

Deliver services in neighborhoods and campus communities where Black men live, learn, and work. Intentionally place adapted resources with information about accessing services in locations most frequented by Black men.

Explain services

Provide options and guidance for how to navigate mental health services on and off campus. Coordinate care when needed, and remove economic barriers to receiving mental health resources and treatment.

Develop partnerships

Work with other groups, on and off campus, that cater to Black college men, such as religious groups, first-generation students, sports teams, and fraternities. Ask to participate in their activities and programming so you can share information about mental health resources and services.

Develop positive working relationships

Collaborate with Black college men. Community is important for the Black men on your campus, so establish and sustain service provider teams that can address the mental health and well-being needs of your Black men on campus.

Additional Resources

MSU CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES
- **MSU Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) • (517) 355-8270**
  www.caps.msu.edu/
- **MSU Fee Hall Psychiatry Clinic** • (517) 353-3070
  www.psychiatry.msu.edu/services
- **MSU Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities** • (517) 884-7273
  www.rcpd.msu.edu

COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH (24-HOUR CRISIS NUMBERS):
- **Clinton-Eaton-Ingham Community Mental Health** • (517) 346-8200
- **MSU Sexual Assault Program Crisis Line** • (517) 372-6666
- **MSU Center for Survivors** • (517) 355-3551
- **Detroit Wayne County Mental Health Authority** • (313) 833-2500
- **Detroit Integrated Health Network** • (800) 241-4949
- **Macomb County Community Mental Health • (586) 307-9100**

EMERGENCY SERVICES
- **Sparrow Hospital** • (517) 364-1000
  www.sparrow.org/locations/
- **Henry Ford Hospitals** • (313) 916-2600
  www.henryford.com/locations/henry-ford-hospital

Acknowledgment

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"Mental health issues prohibit you from moving forward or battling the issue at hand just because you're stuck in this mindset of: I don't have a chance to win. I'm just going to lose, so why even try?"

- MSU YBMEN PROJECT PARTICIPANT
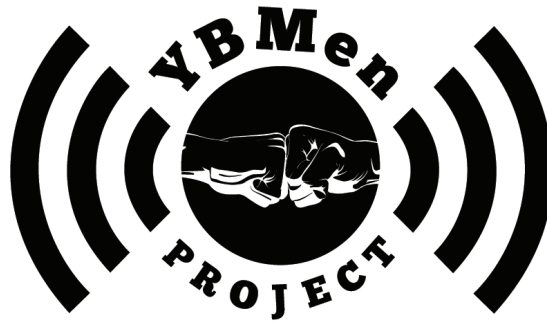
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OCTOBER / 2021

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The mission of the Vivian A. and James L. Curtis Center for Health Equity Research and Training at the University of Michigan School of Social Work is to stimulate research, training, and outreach opportunities that promote health equity. We do this by supporting work that deepens our understanding of the factors that lead to inequities and the strategies that eliminate them.