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

The Ohio State University

The Ohio State University (OSU) is a public land-grant research university ranked among the best public universities in the United States. The main campus in Columbus is one of America's largest and most comprehensive universities.

OSU enrolled 61,369 students at its Columbus campus in the fall of 2020. Of the total Columbus campus student body, approximately 47,000 were undergraduate students. Undergraduate minority students made up 23.9% of the total Columbus campus student population in the fall of 2020.

Contents

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Why We Should Care About Black Men and their Mental Health

For several decades, institutional racism, social injustice, systemic poverty and blatant discrimination have negatively affected the mental health and overall quality of life for people of color in the United States. Over the past three years, stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality toward Black men and racial tension have increased mental health challenges among Black men.

For young Black men in particular, there are additional social and economic pressures associated with transitioning to young adulthood. For young Black men aged 18 to 30, the transition to adulthood often changes their independence, family role, identity and social relationships (Watkins, 2012). It is also a time when cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man surface. There are societal expectations for Black men to prove their masculinity and mental strength despite their daily emotional stressors. These accumulated stressors directly impact the mental well-being of Black men.

Black men who struggle with defining their masculinity and mental health often suffer in silence. The number of suicide attempts by Black men increased by 162.4% between 1991 and 2019, more than any other race or gender subgroup (Xiao et al., 2021). Despite these alarming numbers, the number of Black men aged 18 to 44 seeking mental health treatment is low compared to white men (Blumberg & Clarke, 2015). Studies show that college-enrolled Black men were also less likely to report symptoms of depression and seek mental health treatment. Black males found it difficult to complete college on predominantly white college campuses due to challenges related to gendered, race-based stereotypes. Black men were constantly exposed to racial insults and harassment from the dominant group, causing emotional fatigue over time and poor mental health. Mental health concerns among Black college- enrolled men will likely increase given the rise in social unrest on college campuses (Robinson-Perez, 2021).

Cultural beliefs about masculinity and mental health stigma discourage Black men from seeking mental health care. Studies show that 63% of Black people in the U.S. believe that poor mental health is a sign of personal weakness (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.). This stigma is most prevalent among Black men. The lack of access to mental health care, a distrust of the healthcare system and a limited number of culturally sensitive mental health treatment providers are other factors that discourage Black men from seeking the care they need (Hoskin, 2021).

> " **According to the World Health Organization, mental health is 'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to her or his community'**
>
> **(Miskin, n.d.).**

> **According to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, mental illness is an underrecognized and undertreated problem among African American men.**
>
> **(National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities & Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., n.d.))**

The Need for Culturally Sensitive Mental Health Care for Young Black Men

According to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, mental illness is an underrecognized and undertreated problem among African American men (National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities & Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., n.d.)). Recent studies show Black men are more likely to receive mental health treatment if they can find culturally responsive care from professionals who understand and embrace their unique differences. Unlike traditional mental health therapy, culturally responsive care encourages Black men to openly talk about their racial trauma, cultural beliefs and definitions of masculinity with a professional who is sensitive to the racial challenges of Black men. Over time, Black men are better able to identify their emotions and feel more comfortable communicating their feelings on a deeper level (DeAngelis, 2021).

Improved mental health treatment for Black men is promising due to a growing body of research and recent innovative interventions. Aside from the adaptations of individual therapy, there are community programs in barbershops and other local venues, outreach through technology and social media and national networks dedicated to promoting Black men's mental health and well-being (DeAngelis, 2021).

Effective mental health care for Black men requires therapists to consider treatment that embraces the backgrounds, culture and challenges Black men face in society. In 2021, the American Psychological Association revised its guidelines for treating Black men with mental health challenges (American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018). The guidelines acknowledge the racial, cultural, and social challenges Black men face and how these challenges 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 adopting these considerations will help practitioners shape individual treatment plans and better mental health outcomes for Black men.

The Importance of Internet-based Social Support Groups for Young Black Men

Social support is associated with improved health outcomes when coping with stressful and adverse life events (Watkins et al., 2017). Internet-based support groups can provide care for those uncomfortable talking about their mental health in a face-to-face setting. Unlike formal support groups, internet-based groups share their experiences in an anonymous, unbiased space. The widespread network of users and increased accessibility make online support groups effective and easy to join.

The convenience, anonymity and confidentiality features of internet support groups have increased the number of men utilizing these groups. Private support groups for Black men are popular because they provide space for intimate discussions about sensitive topics with other Black men. The confidentiality and anonymity of these personal conversations are essential to the effectiveness of groups supporting Black men (Watkins et al., 2017). For some, knowing that other Black men face similar difficulties makes mental health care less stigmatizing.

According to research by Watkins and colleagues (2020), Black men benefit from participating in internet-based social support groups. Men reported feeling a sense of camaraderie, which helped create lasting positive relationships among individuals in the group. They also liked having more time to think about responses before sharing them.

Studies show Black men with greater levels of social support have better health status, quality of life and well-being (Cooper et al., 2013). Black men who have participated in private support groups report:

- Decreased depression symptoms
- Increased confidence
- Stronger social relationships
- Healthier and more progressive ideas of manhood

A Program to Improve Mental Health: The Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) Project

The YBMen Project is a mental health education and social support program for young Black men. Using popular social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), YBMen creates a space for young Black men to engage with other Black men about their social pressures, perceptions of manhood, life experiences and mental health challenges. The program uses culturally sensitive, age-appropriate and gender-specific content to encourage group discussions in an anonymous and private space.

The award-winning YBMen program was developed by Dr. Daphne C. Watkins, Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan. As a health educator and Black men's mental health scholar and expert, Dr. Watkins knew firsthand about the mental health challenges faced by Black men and the lack of resources available to help them. So, in 2008, Dr. Watkins first came up with the idea for the YBMen Project as a program to educate young Black men about ways to improve their mental health, increase their social support and expand their definitions of manhood.

Dr. Watkins launched the first pilot YBMen program at Jackson College in 2014 with 30 Black male students. Today, the YBMen Project has successfully engaged in multiple ways with more than 850 young Black and Indigenous men in the U.S. and Australia. Plans are underway to expand the program to Michigan high schools and other colleges and universities worldwide.

How YBMen Works on College Campuses

The length and content of the YBMen program are adapted to fit the partnering campuses' needs. YBMen campus partners recruit participants for the program with the support of the YBMen Project team. During recruitment, young Black men interested in YBMen complete an interview or focus group and initial survey before enrolling in the program. Responses from the interview and survey help reveal the survey respondent's perceptions of manhood, social support, mental health and other topics selected by our campus partners. After enrolling in the program, the young men are assigned to a private YBMen group and begin weekly online educational modules and discussions with team leaders. The online discus-

sions encourage group problem-solving, action planning, and individual decision-making. At the end of the program, the young men complete a post-program interview and survey about their experience. The before and after interview and survey responses are compared to assess changes in the young men's mental health, perceptions of manhood and social support over time (i.e., before the program started vs. after the program ended).

Pictured: Todd A. Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male

The Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male (BNRC) at the Ohio State University

Concerned about the academic success and well-being of its Black male student population, OSU's Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Office of Student Affairs created the Black Male Initiative (BMI) to improve retention and graduation rates for Black males on its Columbus campus. The Initiative, under the leadership of Dr. James L. Moore III and BMI program coordinator Mr. Todd Bell, provided unique programming for Black men, including an early arrival first-year orientation, a leadership series, an Emerging Scholars Math Program and a Gathering of Men meeting to unify Black male students, staff, faculty and community

professionals. The BMI successfully brought about significant improvements in student performance, satisfaction and graduation rates.

Since 2005, the BMI, renamed the Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male, has expanded its academic programming to include hosting an annual lecture series. The Center also hosts engaging group conversations among Black males and staff and professional networking opportunities in the community. The Gathering of Men meeting is now an annual event.

The YBMen Project and the Bell National Resource Center (BNRC) Partnership — Expanding Mental Health Education and Social Support for Young Black Men

With an awareness of the BNRC's initiatives for its Black male students, YBMen Founding Director Dr. Daphne C. Watkins invited Dr. James L. Moore III, Executive Director of BNRC, to partner on a YBMen program uniquely designed for OSU. "The YBMen program complements the initiatives already in place to support Black male students at OSU," said Watkins, "such as those offered through the Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male." The addition of mental health education and social support broadens BNRC's Black male programming efforts and further supports the well-being of OSU's Black male students.

In the fall of 2017, YBMen and BNRC developed a plan and created a program to fit the needs of OSU's Black male students.

" The YBMen program complements the initiatives already in place to support Black male students at OSU," said Watkins, "such as those offered through the Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male.

Daphne C. Watkins, PhD

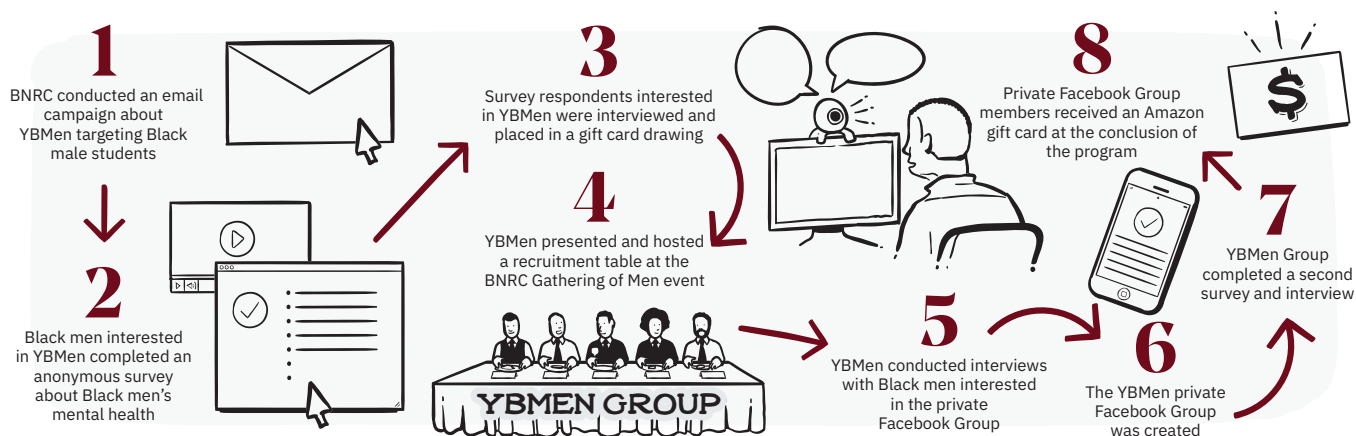YBMen Founding Director and Professor of Social Work, University of Michigan

Developing the YBMen Program at OSU

With support from Daniel Thomas, Assistant Director at BNRC, the plan for the specialized YBMen program began with an email campaign to recruit Black male students. Black males on OSU's main campus received flyers about the program and a link to an anonymous survey about Black men's mental health, manhood and social support. To strengthen their recruitment efforts, BNRC invited YBMen to present its program during their annual Gathering of Men event and host a table to distribute flyers, share YBMen's eligibility criteria and collect data from students attending the event. Black male students

who completed a survey were entered into an Amazon gift card drawing. Black males who completed the survey and expressed an interest in participating in the YBMen private Facebook group were later interviewed and given another gift card. Participants previously diagnosed with mental health disorders were not eligible to participate in the program.

This figure shows the YBMen action plan and recruitment process performed to create the YBMen FaceBook group at OSU:

1 BNRC conducted an email campaign about YBMen targeting Black male students

2 Black men interested in YBMen completed an anonymous survey about Black men's mental health

3 Survey respondents interested in YBMen were interviewed and placed in a gift card drawing

4 YBMen presented and hosted a recruitment table at the BNRC Gathering of Men event

5 YBMen conducted interviews with Black men interested in the private Facebook Group

6 The YBMen private Facebook Group was created

7 YBMen Group completed a second survey and interview

8 Private Facebook Group members received an Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the program

The YBMen Project team collected 170 surveys from Black male students and completed 25 interviews at OSU. Of the collected surveys, 36 (21.2%) participants completing the survey were first-generation students, 62 (36.5%) were not married or had significant others, 73 (42.9%) were heterosexual/straight, 5 (2.9%) were gay/same-gender loving and 7 (4.1%) were bisexual.

> " Today, more than ever, we need to dedicate a considerable amount of resources to support Black men in protecting and reestablishing their mental health. Over the last two years, our students have faced challenges in response to the ongoing pandemic and the heightened visibility of the social unrest in the U.S. and around the world. Historically, Black males attending predominantly white institutions are impacted personally by prior lived experience and the ingrained systemic structures within universities. Our partnership with YBMen allows us to understand better the difficulties that our students face, provide them with resources that directly address their needs and position them to be retained and to graduate in a timely manner.

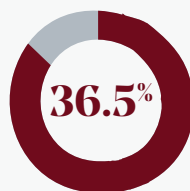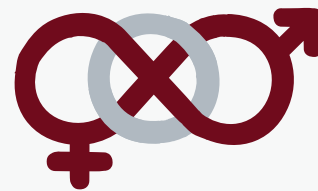**Daniel Thomas**

Bell National Resource Center Assistant Director
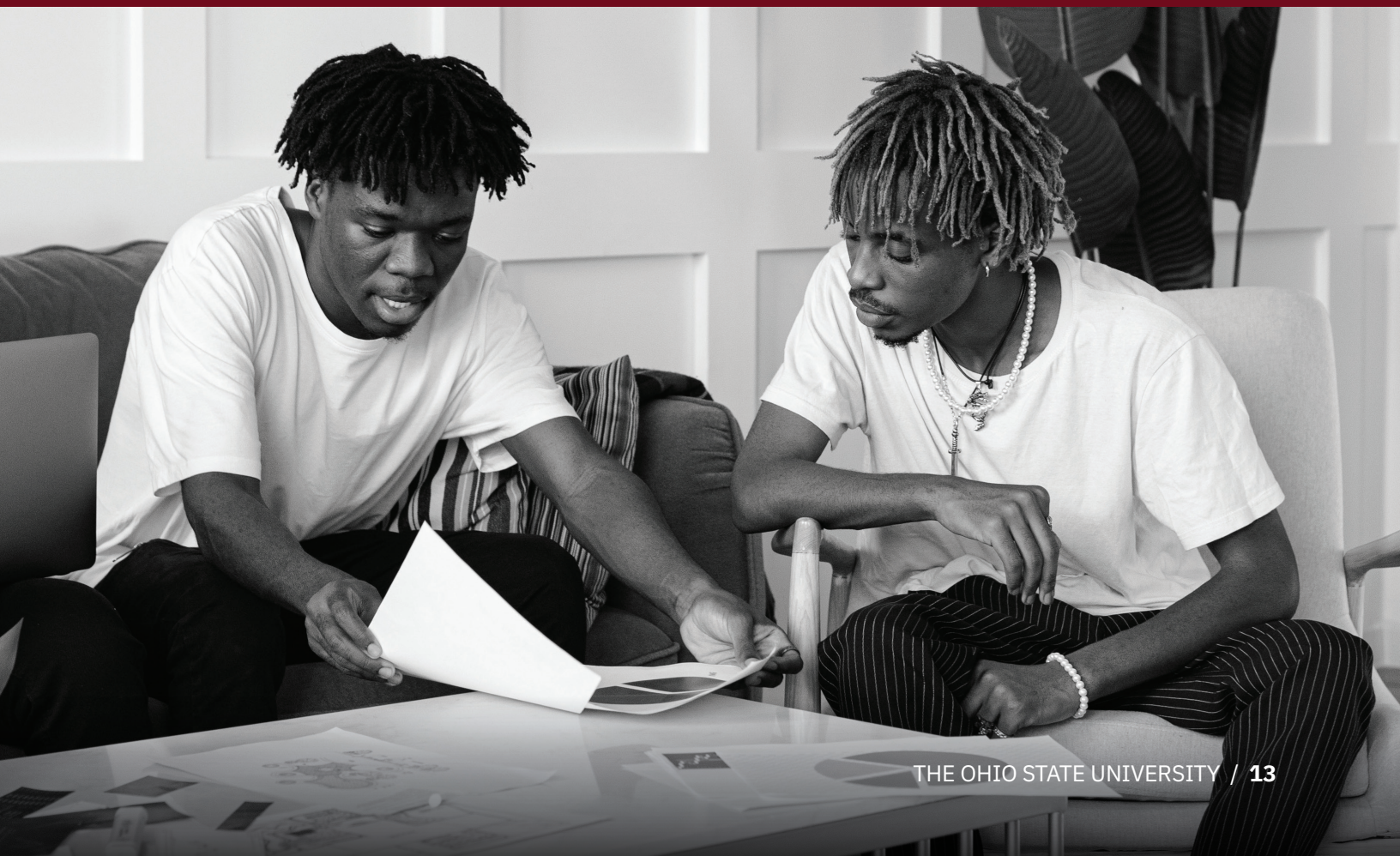
21.2% First Generation

18 THROUGH 25
Years of Age

36.5%
Single/Not Married

**2.9% Gay/Same-Gender Loving
4.1% Bisexual**

Twenty (20) Black males at OSU signed up and completed the YBMen intervention. These young men completed the five-week program via the private Facebook group and the post-survey and video interview.

Outcomes of the YBMen Program at OSU

The OSU YBMen Program participants completed a five-week program. The men enjoyed the current and relevant social media content posted in the Facebook group. Participants were extremely pleased to have a private space for intimate, anonymous discussions about different masculinities, social support and the importance of seeking mental help when needed with other Black men. Many appreciated being encouraged to communicate and respond to one another, and they valued the contributions of other group members. Responses from the post-program surveys and interviews about their experiences were positive and indicated:

- Increased awareness and understanding of various definitions of manhood
- Decreased depressive symptoms
- Greater appreciation for and acceptance of social support

More Progressive Masculine Norms (CMNI)
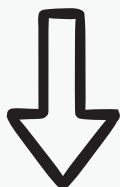
Fewer Depression Symptoms (GMDS, PHQ-9)

More Positive Attitudes About Social Support (ISEL)

DEFINITIONS:

The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI) examines conformity to traditional and progressive 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 Young Black Men at OSU Said About the YBMen Experience

MENTAL HEALTH

"Uh, I just feel as though in the Black community, there's a stigma with, uh, mental health … constantly … you hear, 'Go pray about it.' Or, 'Go to church.' And you really don't have anything where it's like, 'Oh, go seek treatment.'
… I feel as though in other cultures, it's more acceptable to, uh, go and get, uh, professional help."

"Parents are more likely to take their children of other cultures to see a therapist. Whereas in a Black community, I don't know too many Black families, at least in — where I grew up at, that would be willing to take their kids to see a therapist."

"I've heard a lot wherein the Black community mental health isn't looked at as deeply. It's more of a white person problem."

"Mental health … where I come from … it's always, like, a hush-hush. It's like, 'Don't talk about that.' You know, like, 'That's not your business. Don't tell people about that.' I feel it's important because if you don't tell someone about what you're goin' through, you can't get help for it. It just makes the problem worse."

MASCULINITY/MANHOOD

"… in terms of body type, you're usually expecting muscular, athletic — probably some misogynistic behaviors, being successful in dating. Promiscuity probably falls in line with that. Did I say aggressive behavior? Aggression, especially if it comes to self-defense or respect."

"Uh, I never really had a conversation with the Black men in my life about masculinities or their masculinity."

"… there's, like, no room for slipping up … since we're the minority, there's no room for making mistakes, or that could be even more detrimental — for Black men."

"Black men have the sense of having to be better and … having to go the extra mile to prove yourself. And other races might not feel that way; I think especially white people, you know what I'm sayin', like … I know if I'm at a job application and ten other white people are applying for the same job as me, I have to do something to make myself stand out … there's just no other option."

SOCIAL SUPPORT

"My supervisor asked me, what do I do for self-care? And I literally laughed, and I said, 'What are you talking about? I don't know that concept.'"

"I know who I am open to and who I'm not open to. And I sort of like vary from where that may be. I like third parties. If I'm going to talk to you about my emotions, I want a person that is disconnected from my friend group, disconnected from my family, and there's extreme confidentiality."

"I've been raised not to ask for help … to figure out on your own because that's what men do."

"… people who are willing to listen to you, to be there for you at almost any hour of the day … to not only give you advice but be there to be an ear."

YBMEN FACEBOOK INTERVENTION

"… people were feeling the same way I was feeling … [and] they were saying it in like different ways. So that was a little bit more refreshing too, like — like I never like thought about it in that way … like we're all thinking the same things, but we're all having, uh, different experiences with what we're thinking. So it was kind of like — gives you a little bit more perspective."

"It was content that was relevant to today. It was content that was … social media based … so it was, like — it was more relevant to me and my life. It wasn't … like … school [where] they give you a lot of older information, older statistics, and so, like, the information [YBMen] were providing us with in the — in the group was a lot more relevant to today."

> **Life on the margins, at predominately white institutions, is an unpleasant reality for many Black male students. Unsurprisingly, mental health challenges have risen for them over the years. Some Black male students are eager to seek mental health treatment, when needed, and others are apprehensive of seeking such care. Culturally relevant mental health services are essential for Black male college students. The findings from the YBMen Project notes the importance of these kinds of mental health services. I hope that the YBMen Project findings are widely disseminated and that the investigators are able to obtain additional funding to expand the project.**

James L. Moore III, PhD

Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer

Executive Director for Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male

EHE Distinguished Professor of Urban Education

The Ohio State University

Summary

Black men experience anxiety, depression, racial trauma and other persistent emotional distress that significantly affects their mental health and quality of life. Fear of stigma and misinformation about mental illness and the lack of culturally sensitive mental health care are barriers for Black men seeking mental health treatment. Innovative mental health programs that embrace Black men's culture and increase mental health awareness are needed to remove the obstacles to receiving mental health care.

The YBMen Program offers young Black college-aged men access to educational information about mental health and manhood and social support during their transitions to and through college. The program uses familiar social media platforms, making it convenient to engage anonymously in sensitive topics with other Black men of similar backgrounds. Over time, YBMen participants become comfortable communicating their emotions and experiences, resulting in increased confidence, healthier ideas of masculinity and more robust social relationships. Black men who participate in YBMen also acquire better mental health literacy and emotional vocabulary, which leads to better mental health communication and mental health wellness.

The OSU BNRC YBMen Program was a success. Young Black men participating in the program reported fewer depression symptoms, expanded perceptions of masculinity and better mental health awareness after completing the program.

Colleges and universities can play a significant role in helping Black men on their campuses have better mental health by creating funding sources to support culturally responsive mental health programs and services. We hope the success of the YBMen program at OSU will inspire and inform future mental health programming decisions at OSU and at other colleges and universities across the U.S.

Recommendations for Developing Culturally Responsive Mental Health Programs for Black Men

Below are recommendations for campus partners and service providers to consider as you develop programs and services that improve mental health wellness for Black men.

1. Create programs that cater specifically to Black men on your campus.

2. Involve Black men in developing programs and in the decision-making process for the programs you plan to offer.

3. Recognize the individual differences in Black men. Be sensitive to age, belief systems, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status when developing programs.

4. Provide nontraditional methods for Black men to seek mental health care. Consider using social media or other campus-based technology programs that help Black men ask for help.

5. Insist that your on-campus mental health service providers be culturally competent and sensitive to Black men's mental health challenges.

6. Create spaces for Black men who feel comfortable talking about their mental health challenges in a group. Seeing other men with similar difficulties can make mental health care for some less stigmatizing.

7. Make mental health care easily accessible. Deliver services in neighborhoods where Black men live, learn and work. Intentionally place literature with information about where to get mental health services in locations most frequented by young Black men.

8. Regularly talk about the importance of mental health on campus. Include mental health discussions as part of campus orientation for Black men. Help remove mental health stigma by inviting young Black men with previous mental health challenges to share their journeys and treatment experiences.

9. Provide help navigating mental health services on and off campus as needed to coordinate care. Remove the economic barriers to receiving mental health treatment.

10. Develop partnerships with other groups, on or off campus, that cater to young Black men, such as religious groups, sports teams and fraternities. Ask to participate in their activities and programming to share mental health services information.

OSU Campus Mental Health Resources

COUNSELING AND CONSULTATION SERVICE, OFFICE OF STUDENT LIFE
- (614) 292-5766
- http://ccs.osu.edu/

STUDENT WELLNESS CENTER
- http://www.swc.osu.edu

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY MULTICULTURAL CENTER (MCC)
- (614) 688-8449
- http://multiculturalcenter.osu.edu

24-Hour Crisis Help

ALCOHOL, DRUG AND MENTAL HEALTH BOARD OF FRANKLIN COUNTY (FORMERLY KNOWN AS FRANKLIN COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE HOTLINE)
- (614) 276-2273
- Toll-Free at (888) 276-2273
- https://adamhfranklin.org/

HUCKLEBERRY HOUSE EMERGENCY CRISIS COUNSEL-ING AND SHELTER FOR TEENAGERS
- (614) 294-5553
- https://www.huckhouse.org/

HANDSON CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION AND REFER-RAL RESOURCE SERVICE (LSS 211 CENTRAL OHIO)
- (614) 221-6766
- https://lssnetworkofhope.org/211centralohio/

Emergency Services

GRANT MEDICAL CENTER EMERGENCY
- (614) 566-9000
- Thttps://www.ohiohealth.com/locations/hospitals/grant-medical-center

OHIOHEALTH EMS
- (614) 566-9111
- http://www.ohiohealthems.com/

OSUCCS APP
- Free 24/7 Mental Health Support and Resources for All OSU Students

Additional Off-Campus Resources in Columbus:

REAL (ONLINE/ON-DEMAND THERAPY FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS)
- https://www.join-real.com/real-to-the-people

TALK SPACE
- https://www.talkspace.com/

HEADSPACE
- https://www.headspace.com/covid-19

NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR MENTAL HEALTH
- https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavi-rus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf?lang=en-US

NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL WORKERS
- Social Work Help Line: (614) 645-6807

MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA OF OHIO INC.
- (614) 221-1441
- http://www.mhafc.org
- 2323 W. Fifth Avenue, Suite 160, Columbus, OH 43204

OHIO CARE LINE (A TOLL-FREE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT CALL SERVICE)
- Behavioral health professionals staff the Care Line 24/7
- (800) 720-9616

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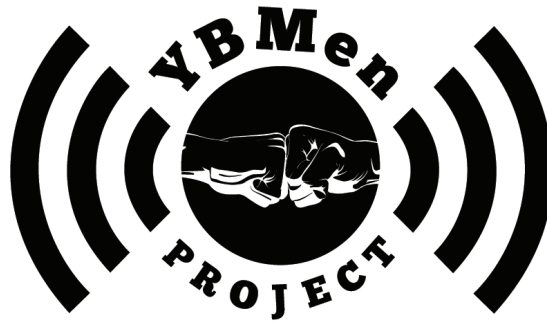
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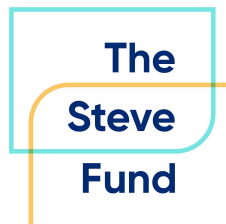
The mission of the Vivian A. and James L. Curtis Center for Health Equity Research and Training at the University of Michigan School of Social Work is to stimulate research, training, and outreach opportunities that promote health equity. We do this by supporting work that deepens our understanding of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