



SHINING A LIGHT ON MENTAL HEALTH IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

Quick Stats

- **38.3%** of Black Canadian residents with poor or fair self-reported mental health used mental health services compared with **50.8%** White Canadian residents (between 2001 and 2014).¹
- Based on a 2018 survey of 328 Black Canadian residents
 - **60%** said they would be more willing to use mental health services if the mental health professional were Black
 - **35.4%** were experiencing significant psychological distress, **34.2%** of whom never sought mental health services
 - **95.1%** felt that the underutilization of mental health services by Black Canadian residents was an issue that needed to be addressed.²

COVID-19

- According to a 2020 Statistics Canada survey, for most measures of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants from the Black visible-minority group reported poorer self-rated mental health and greater financial insecurity compared with White participants.
- **27.9%** of Black visible-minority respondents, compared to **22.9%** of White respondents, reported fair/poor self-rated mental health.
- **32%** of Black visible-minority respondents, compared to **24.2%** of White respondents, reported symptoms consistent with moderate/severe generalized anxiety disorder in the two weeks prior to completing the survey.
- **37.5%** of Black visible-minority respondents, compared to **22.1%** of White respondents, reported COVID-19-related financial insecurity.³

Barriers to Care

SYSTEMIC INEQUITY

Historically, the Black community has been placed at a disadvantage when it comes to their mental health, given their subjection to trauma through enslavement, oppression, colonialism, racism, and segregation, much of which extends to the experience of mental health care inequity today.

- Black persons in Canada have higher unemployment rates, as well as lower average incomes,⁴ which may preclude them from the wider selection of mental health services available to those able to pay privately or go through employer-covered insurance plans.
- Black persons in Canada are more likely to experience challenges in finding family physicians, who often serve as an important gateway to mental health care.⁵
- Among Black-Caribbean populations, wait times for mental health care averaged 16 months, more than twice those for Whites (which averaged seven months).⁶
- Despite the higher prevalence of mental illness found in low-income areas (where Black populations disproportionately reside), these communities often have fewer mental health programs and services.⁷

LACK OF REPRESENTATION

It can be difficult to build trust if the help seeker does not believe that the professional can relate to their experience or understand their point of view. From the deep-rooted impacts of anti-Black racism to intergenerational trauma and cultural biases, sharing common ground facilitates connection-building between the patient and care provider. Unfortunately, simply finding a Black mental health professional in North America can be challenging, let alone one from the same cultural background.

- In the U.S., roughly four per cent of psychologists are Black, compared to 86 per cent who are White.⁸
- Of those surveyed in Canada (as noted), 60 per cent reported that they would be more willing to speak to a mental health professional if they were Black.⁹

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND AWARENESS

Studies have found that difficulty recognizing symptoms of depression and a lack of information about mental health prevented Black people (especially older adults) from seeking mental health services when symptoms first presented themselves.¹⁰

- For people in Black communities, finding mental health care or even knowing when one might need it is more difficult because of a lack of information about mental health issues.¹¹
- The limited nature of mental health literacy among Black people living in Canada, the U.K., and the U.S., has been found to impede psychological help seeking.¹²



MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Help seeking in Black communities can be discouraged by misconceptions about mental illness. These include:

- Mental health support is reserved for people experiencing severe mental illness or psychiatric issues but not those in need of a healthy mind to deal with emotions and learn how to improve the quality of their lives.*
- Mental health problems can get better on their own.¹³
- Black people who seek professional help have less faith in God.¹⁴
- Ongoing mental or emotional challenges are an inherent part of the Black experience (otherwise known as “the struggle”) – therefore, mental illness isn’t a problem in Black communities.¹⁵

STIGMA

Stigma (including self-stigma) can prevent people in Black communities from discussing or seeking support for their mental health.

- If mental illness has always been a taboo topic in one’s family or community, it can be even more daunting to break the mould and start a conversation.*
- Some people feel that seeking mental health support undermines their faith. If they believe both can co-exist, the fear of judgment from other members of that religious community may continue.†
- Not everyone is aware of the confidentiality that exists between mental health professionals and their patients. Some people fear that, if they seek help, word will spread through the community and they may be negatively judged as a result.‡

* From an MHCC research interview with a Canadian public health physician, January 13, 2021.

† From an MHCC research interview with a Canadian community health worker, January 14, 2021.

‡ MHCC community health worker interview, January 14, 2021.

Considerations for promoting mental health in Black communities

Whether you're a Black person, a health-care professional, or an organization focused on building awareness, you can take steps to de-stigmatize help seeking and build healthier Black communities:

- Spread the message that seeking support is not just for those with a mental illness – it's an important part of maintaining overall good health.
- Be sure to include Black representation in awareness campaigns to help dispel the myth that mental health problems do not exist in Black communities.
- Include multiple Black representatives in the development of mental health programs and initiatives to advocate for the diverse needs of their communities. Studies have shown that integrating culturally responsive care in such programs improves mental health service use among Black people in Canada.¹⁶
- In care settings, ensure that all professionals receive cultural competency training to better understand the factors that may contribute to poor mental health in Black communities, including the unique challenges faced by immigrants and refugees.

If you're hesitant to ask for help, remember...

- Seeking support when you need it shows strength, not weakness.
- Like physical health care, strict confidentiality rules are in place between mental health professionals and their clients.
- Culturally specific resources exist. Your local community health centre may be able to help you find the program or counsellor that most closely matches your background or personal preference.
- Free mental health support is available. In addition to the resources, you can ask your local community health centre about no-cost programs in your area.



RESOURCES

[FAMHAS Foundation](#)
[Black Health Alliance](#)
[Wellness Together Canada](#)
[Crisis Text Line](#) (free 24-7 support)
[Canadian Mental Health Association](#)

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For more information, visit www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/covid19



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