

**Psychology For Blacks**  
**Mental Illness**  
**In Blacks**

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 and  
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Mental illness refers to an inability to function effectively because of disturbances of personality or thought processes. Most people traditionally equate mental illness with the most severe instances of malfunctioning. Recent trends, however, have moved to include forces on milder disturbances of personality that can lead up to more severe disorders.

Mental health workers are beginning to recognize the need to prevent severe disturbances by helping individuals find ways to cope with day to day demands. Thus, there has been an increase in outreach programs and community mental health facilities. Efforts are even being made to reintegrate hospitalized persons into the community instead of prolonged institutionalization.

The diagnosis of mental illness has traditionally been based on what is "normal" or average in society. Unfortunately for blacks, this practice is still very much alive today. White researchers have recorded higher incidence of mental illness among black persons. The incidence rates are even higher for specific pathologies such as criminal behavior and schizophrenic, a severe disturbance.

Numerous factors, no doubt, contribute to the high incidence of mental illness among black persons. White professionals frequently attribute deviate behavior among blacks to individual inadequacies in personality development and to the disorganization of black families.

Other explanations have been offered by emerging black professionals. They challenge the basis on which diagnoses are made, pointing to the fact that decision of "normality" vs. "abnormality" rest in the hands of whites. These individuals have little or no knowledge of black culture. They tend to compare black adjustment to a racist society with that of whites who are fully accepted in society.

Black professionals have called attention to the fact that some behavior such as mistrust of social institutions may be adoptive for blacks, while indicating maladaptation for white persons.

The assertion that "pathology" observed among blacks stems from basic personality inadequacies is also challenged by black professionals. To be sure, blacks can and do have personality disturbances. However, a great deal of pathological behavior among blacks can be explained by external environmental conditions.

The method of treatment or lack of treatment of mental illness has also been affected by erroneous assumptions and theories. Treatment generally has either of two goals -- personality reorganization or simple maintenance. Reorganization of personality is based on the assumption of inadequacies within the individual; maintenance techniques such as medication are used to control or stabilize individuals who are predicted not to respond to traditional "talking therapies".

Generally, blacks are thought to be inappropriate for personality reorganization. It is reasoned that inadequate language skills and intellectual capacity, make "talking therapy" an unrealistic treatment for blacks. This treatment is also held as the most desirable form of treatment by white professionals. Thus blacks frequently receive medication while living in society, or hospitalization for severe disturbances.

Dr. James Carter, a black psychiatrist at Duke University, commended at a local workshop that treatment goals for blacks should emphasize changes now rather than complex explanations of personality development. Dr. Carter observed that, for black persons, racism contributes to mental disorders.

Black mental health workers are just beginning to attack the problems of black mental health care. It is becoming obvious that, for blacks, this attack cannot be limited to the contact with patients at mental health facilities.

It must include intervention on all levels of society -- from the theories of human development which originated from sick and racist mentalities; to public schools which alienate black children and leave them hopeless; to mental health training programs which do not address black concerns properly; to economic and political systems which restrict black people's vehicles for effective functioning.

Mental health facilities are maintained by black tax dollars and, as such, are obligated to develop appropriate treatment. It is up to citizens, as well as professionals to actively challenge existing mental health facilities to respond appropriately to the black community.

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