Oh, Happy Day!

This community-based intervention program can help depressed elderly blacks “beat the blues.”

September 12, 2011 By Katie Karlson

Fifteen million Americans suffer from depression. Among them, one group is especially under-diagnosed and under-treated: older African Americans.

The causes of depression among elderly black people are often the same issues that plague seniors of all races: physical challenges, chronic illnesses, loss of significant loved ones, and increased dependence on others. But boilerplate methods for treating depression often don’t meet the needs of older African Americans who might also struggle to overcome stigma linked to depression and a cultural mistrust of mental health treatments.

Enter Beat the Blues, a five-year program (to end in 2012) developed by sociologist Laura N. Gitlin, PhD, director of the Aging Intervention Center at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. The intervention provides seniors with depression education, stress-reduction techniques, care management, referrals and linkage to other support and services. Even more important, the innovative project teaches seniors that depression isn’t an unavoidable part of aging and that it’s a treatable mental health condition.

How, exactly, do these folks beat the blues? At a local Philadelphia senior center, for example, Gitlin motivates elderly African Americans to re-engage in activities and become more socially involved in their communities.

But beyond the initiative’s immediate mission lies an even loftier goal: to be a template for similar programs targeting diverse low-income, under-treated elderly populations. After all, you’re never too old to learn new tricks for improved mental health.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/depression-elderly-blacks-21078-6332