Secrets, Shame and Stigma

How one agency challenges minorities to break through these mental health care barriers

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About 7.5 million African Americans have a diagnosed mental illness. But almost the same number of black people go undiagnosed and untreated because of stigma.

When it comes to mental health issues, African Americans tend to rely on religious figures, friends and family for emotional support instead of turning to health care professionals—in fact, mental illness is often stigmatized and misunderstood in the black community. What's more, African Americans often lack social and economic resources to access mental and medical health care.

But the Behavioral Health and Recovery Services Division of San Mateo County in California is working to change the way minorities view mental health disorders. The agency's Anti-Stigma Initiative has recruited a diverse volunteer group that consists of mental health clients, individuals recovering from substance abuse, family members, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and other community members to dispel mental illness myths through entertainment and education.

Members of the group perform in plays that clearly teach audiences how cultural barriers can contribute to stigma and stop people from seeking mental health care when they need it.

Let's hear some applause for their efforts!

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