

Black churches address suicide, mental illness

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue



Tamara Warren Chinyani, an instructor with the “Mental Health First Aid” program, led a session at an African-American church in Washington, D.C. on August 2 about signs and symptoms of mental illness. Photo courtesy of Tamara Warren Chinyani

The death of comedian Robin Williams has heightened awareness of suicide and mental health. But many African-American churches quietly began educating members on the issue well before.

“A lot of times in the past, African Americans have viewed severe depression and other mental illnesses as indicating a spiritual weakness,” said Tamara Warren Chinyani, an instructor with the Mental Health First Aid program. “We’re changing that paradigm around.”

The National Council for Behavioral Health introduced the program in the United States in 2008, with the goal of helping people learn how to spot signs and symptoms of mental illness. The program began its focus on African-American churches this year.

African Americans are 20 percent more likely than non-Hispanic whites to report instances of serious psychological stress, according to the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. And while more white teens carry out suicide than their black counterparts, more African-American teens (8.3 percent)

attempt suicide than their white peers (6.2 percent).

Some of the people leading the effort to build awareness about mental illness have seen its most tragic consequences up close.

William and Dianne Young cofounded the National Suicide and the Black Church Conference about a decade ago after one of their congregants shot and killed herself under a large cross on the church grounds in Memphis, Tennessee. Fifty people attended the first biennial meeting, and about 500 attended the 2013 gathering.

“People will come to the church when they won’t go to a mental health center,” said William Young, who attended a July launch of a broader new initiative called the Mental Health and Faith Community Partnership.

The couple started “Emotional Fitness Centers” at ten churches in Tennessee, in hopes they will increase access to services and reduce the stigma associated with therapeutic care.

Dianne Young, the centers’ director, said 722 people were screened during the most recent fiscal year, and 300 followed through with the plans they were given, some of which included hospitalization.

In Texas, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health will begin an \$850,000 grant program in October that will help ten African-American churches educate congregants about mental health for the next three years.

Program Officer Vicky Coffee-Fletcher said the foundation received an “overwhelming response” to the grant announcement.

“Pastors are excited about the chance to spread awareness about mental health in a way that capitalizes on their strengths as standard bearers in the community,” she said.

Experts say many African Americans have long been hesitant to pursue medical assistance because of fears they may be discriminated against and because of recollections of notorious experiments on unsuspecting black men in the mid-1900s.

But Frankey Grayton of Edgewood Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., which hosted Warren Chinyani’s recent training session, said it’s time for congregants and clergy to acknowledge their need to learn more and, when necessary, seek help.

“Quite frankly, we felt unprepared,” said Grayton, who learned of the training from another pastor who had participated. “But I don’t think that we as a community can ignore it.”

Now his congregation is developing an action plan, which will range from offering in-house counseling to the bereaved, divorced, and unemployed to determining when they need to call 911 or otherwise seek professional help.

Before she started working directly with congregations, Warren Chinyani trained about 100 clergy and laypeople in two sessions last year sponsored by the Maryland affiliate of Volunteers of America.

The consultant, who used to attend a church in Michigan where a fellow member committed suicide about a decade ago, said she hopes more African-American congregations will step up to a greater role on mental illness, just as many have recently on HIV/AIDS with clinics, health fairs, and counseling.

As she shows videos of people who have recovered and supervises role-playing exercises to foster openness about mental health, she hopes the training will become as common as CPR.

“We want just as many people who are certified in CPR to become knowledgeable and equipped with the tools and skills necessary to help someone who may be experiencing a mental health crisis,” she said. —RNS

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