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A Call to Revitalize Mental Health Wellness Practices for Black, Indigenous, & College Students of Color

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2020 has been a distinct and solemn year for many people who live in the United States, but particularly so for individuals in the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community. It is difficult to ignore the viral statistics that display disproportionately high COVID-19 infection rates and death in BIPOC communities.¹ As COVID-19 data continues to underscore the systemic inequalities that persist within the fabric of American society, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has reemerged in reaction to highly publicized police brutality and the murders of Black individuals.

Given the national unrest and current physical health risks, the mental health of BIPOC communities must not be overlooked as our society attempts to reshape the future for the youth currently living through social-distancing restrictions. This process begins with educating college students—our future leaders—about how to care for their mind, body, and spirit. Being a college student is a challenging stage in life under the most normal of circumstances. The historical events of this year coupled with the stressors faced by BIPOC students at predominately white institutions² call for a revitalization and normalization of mental health care practices within college-age BIPOC communities now more than ever.

Encouraging More Accessible Mental Health Resources

Although colleges tend to offer a multitude of mental health resources for students on campus, many of these resources are not easily accessible to students with busy class or work schedules. Many BIPOC students are faced with the challenge of choosing to spend their free time at an on-campus event provided by their institutions' student health department or by clocking in an extra hour at their work-study position. This choice is especially prevalent for those who are first generation college students and/or come from low-income backgrounds. Mental health resources must be accessible in terms of physical location. A survey conducted by the College Board found that "first-generation students are 20 percent less likely to plan to live on campus (53.9 percent) during their first year of college than non-first-generation students (73.4 percent)."³ The Postsecondary National Policy Institute reports that BIPOC students are approximately 14-20 percent more likely to be first-generation college students than their white peers.⁴

The age of social media and personal devices provides institutions with diverse opportunities to supply students with mental health care resources. Utilizing technology like the mindfulness app subscription, Syracuse University Sanvello Mobile App Initiative, can broaden access for college student users who might have barriers to attending in-person counseling sessions or self-care events. Additionally, it is important to offer more than one app for students in case the interface or objective of another app better meets the individual needs of that student.

Nature is another mental health resource that should be provided in abundance to college students. The great outdoors and even indoor greenery can reduce fear, stress, and anger while encouraging positive emotions and physical wellbeing. In the U.S., Black individuals are 20 percent more likely to experience mental health issues than the rest of the population and Indigenous young adults aged 18-24 have the highest rate of suicide of any ethnic group.⁵ Collaboration between recreation and wellness departments at American universities to provide free nature excursions and outdoor activities in addition to the incorporation of organized community garden events would encourage inner healing, mindfulness, and a greater connection to the university community for BIPOC students.

More Mental Health Practitioners of Color

Yoga is a mindfulness practice and spiritual discipline which originated thousands of years ago and is believed to have been practiced across the globe in North African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and South American civilizations, but it found its fullest expression among the communities of India.⁶ Despite the diverse origins of this practice, 80 percent of the current yogi community in the United States is comprised of White individuals.⁷ A resurgence of yoga's original teachings is needed more than ever for college-aged BIPOC students. According to Yoga International, after [20 weeks of practicing yoga asanas](#), women who previously experienced severe trauma developed a greater ability to communicate internal feelings and emotions and an increased perception and awareness of their body.⁸ Although these benefits are available to all, many BIPOC individuals feel "othered" and uncomfortable in these spaces of healing. Black men make up an especially small percentage of the yogi community. With major depressive episodes increasing among young Black men aged 18-25,⁹ it is imperative the BIPOC community has opportunity to embrace the practice of yoga regardless of preconceived race or gender norms. Greater incorporation of BIPOC yoga and fitness instructors in American colleges can further support the development of a diverse yogi and fitness community along with encouraging mental health education surrounding yoga asanas.

In the U.S. workforce, 86 percent of psychologists are white.¹⁰ As the demand for more BIPOC therapists on American college campuses rises, the lack of representation in the field of psychology becomes more apparent. Attempting to support BIPOC students on college campuses is challenging given the lack of BIPOC individuals working in the field of psychology. College student wellness centers should compile a list of BIPOC therapy providers in the surrounding community and make this information accessible to students on-campus who may prefer a BIPOC therapist. In addition, universities must allocate more resources to their wellness departments and incentivize nearby BIPOC providers to work on-campus to meet the needs of young clients.

A call to revitalize and redefine the field of mental health is evident now more than ever. As the surge of COVID-19 continues to disproportionately impact the health and wellbeing of BIPOC communities, our country must understand the tribulations these individuals face during a global pandemic. College students are the leaders of tomorrow and without adequate mental health resources and policy changes, detrimental mental health cycles will continue into the new generation. Let us be the generation that heals.

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