

Blacks and mental health

Written by Judge Greg Mathis
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Too often, those who suffer with mental illness suffer in silence. Close family members may know the full extent of the affected person's condition but co-workers and friends rarely do. The individual who has been diagnosed would much rather bear the weight of their illness alone than risk being ostracized for something that is out of their control. What about those who are mentally ill and not even aware that they are? In the African American community, there are far too many such individuals. And it's time for that to change.

African Americans are less likely to receive a diagnosis for a mental illness than other racial groups. Because the illnesses aren't diagnosed, individuals don't receive treatment. Untreated mental illness can manifest itself in many ways: some patients turn to drugs to self-medicate, others become violent with loved ones and some may prefer living in the streets to living at home with family. The effects of undiagnosed mental illness extend far beyond the individual and their family: the community is affected, too. Increased crime rates and homeless populations result in additional expenses for local governments.

There are a number of reasons African Americans are not being diagnosed and treated for mental illness in the same way whites are, even though rates of mental illness is the same among both blacks and whites. Key among them is the fact that so many of our people are misinformed about the different mental disorders and the ways they are treated. We still use antiquated terms to describe those who are battling a mental illness and we buy in to stereotypes associated with the disease.

Lack of access to quality healthcare is another reason our people aren't getting the treatment they need. So many communities across the country lack solid clinics that can provide medical and dental care, let alone mental health services.

Mental illness can be treated and many people who suffer, whether it be from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder or another disease, can go on to live relatively normal lives by regularly taking their medication and following the directions of their doctors. But first, we must work to make sure our people are getting to step one: a diagnosis.

Local governments should fund more mental health clinics that provide basic screenings in poverty stricken neighborhoods. Schools, hospitals and community centers should pay attention to the behaviors of their students, patients and customers, referring those who stand out to a mental health professional, and following up to see if they made the appointment. Churches can play a big role, opening up the conversation about mental illness so that families are no longer ashamed to approach the topic with a loved one.

By pushing for awareness in African American communities and increased services in poorer areas, we can begin to erase the stigma associated with the disease and start to create healthier communities.

Judge Greg Mathis became the youngest judge in Michigan's history and was elected a Superior Court Judge for Michigan's 36th District. He has been called upon as a regular contributor to national television programs, including "Larry King Live," "Politically Incorrect," CNN's "Talk Back Live," "Showbiz Tonight" and "Extra" to discuss his opinions on complex issues of the day, such as national security, unique sentencing, affirmative action and celebrity

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scandals. He also offers his take on high-profile legal cases.