

## THINKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

By Jean M. Aniebona, CSW, Psychotherapist/Psychoanalyst

Mental health is an issue for everyone, therefore it is an issue for African-Americans — no matter what their socioeconomic class. There is a fading myth that African-Americans are not in need of the talking cure — that only Caucasians “go there.” In contrast, we solve our problems by force of will, and with support from God, our communities and our families. While this is valid in varying degrees, we can utilize those support systems even more wisely by paying greater attention to our mental health.

The need for African-Americans to care for their emotional well-being can be greater than that in the white culture. African-Americans suffer from high rates of serious mental disorders such as major depression and schizophrenia. We are also vulnerable to such common problems as eating disorders, drug addiction, panic disorders and illnesses caused by workplace stress. The stress and depression caused by our high rates of disease and death also create mental health challenges.

It is dangerous to ignore such mental health issues or to imagine that they will disappear on their own without professional help. Contrary to popular wisdom, African-Americans do commit suicide and the rates seem to be rising especially dramatically among young black men.

Racism also adds to our mental-health woes. In addition to stresses that appear as part of the development of life itself, there is the societal construct of racism. Racism is experienced by people of color on a daily basis and reawakens a history of trauma. It reaches us directly or by vicarious means — this experience overloads our emotional lives, which ultimately affects our physical health.

Our self-concepts and stereotypes can inhibit our seeking help for emotional pain. Black women are stereotyped as strong bearers of all burdens; we are stoic. Historically, black women have been caretakers to white families as well as their own. Historically, black men are to be feared and tamed because they too are seen as strong, but in a threatening way. Such beliefs, if internalized by African-Americans, can interfere with receiving and/or giving emotional relief. It takes courage to break through such a tough facade and reach out for help. When this is accomplished, it can prevent escalating breakdowns of individuals, couples and families.

During my 25 years as a psychotherapist, I have seen the numbers of African-Americans coming into the consulting room increase — not because the need is greater, but because the therapeutic process is becoming more accepted. We need all the healthful supports available to us. If there are internal and external obstacles in the way of using such supports, they must be removed so that we can realize our truly heroic selves.

### Mental Health Resources

Black Psychotherapists Referral Network: (212) 475-8458,

[www.aniebona.com](http://www.aniebona.com)

National Association of Black Social Workers: (202) 589-1850

## DINING ON TIME

If you take diabetes pills or insulin shots, it pays to think about when you'll eat. You can avoid problems by planning ahead:

- If you're eating out with others, ask them to eat at your usual time.
- Make your plans so you won't be kept waiting for a table when you should be eating.
- Have reservations and be on time. Avoid the times when the restaurant is busiest so you won't have to wait.
- Ask whether “special” dishes will take extra time.
- If your lunch or dinner is going to be later than usual, eat a fruit or starch serving from that meal at your usual mealtime.
- If the dinner will be very late, you can snack at your usual dinner-time. Then, eat your full dinner at the later hour. You may need to adjust your insulin to do this.

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## HEALTHY CHOICES WHEN EATING OUT

### Appetizers

- Tomato juice, unsweetened fruit juice
- Clear broth, bouillon, consommé
- Raw (not marinated) vegetables such as celery or radishes; skip the dip
- Fresh fruit
- Fresh, steamed seafood

### Eggs

- Poached, boiled

### Salads

- Tossed vegetable, lettuce, sliced tomato, cucumber
- Cottage cheese (as part of meal plan)
- Salads with low-calorie dressing, lemon juice or vinegar

### Breads

- Whole-grain rolls or crackers, biscuits or breads

### Potatoes and Substitutes

- Baked, boiled or steamed potatoes
- Plain rice or noodles

### Fats

- Diet margarine, low-calorie salad dressing, low-fat sour cream or yogurt

### Vegetables

- Raw, stewed, steamed, boiled

### Meat, Poultry, Fish

- Roasted, baked, broiled or grilled poultry, fish or seafood
- Lean meats with fat trimmed
- Dishes without gravy or sauce

### Desserts

- Fresh fruit or fruit juice
- Fat-free or low-fat yogurt
- Ice cream (work with your doctor or dietitian to fit this into your meal plan)

### Beverages

- Coffee, tea
- Milk
- Sugar-free soda

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