

Breaking the Stigma of my Cultural Background



I have suffered from depression for as long as I can remember. I didn't know what it was until, I experienced a traumatic situation. After that event occurred, it was apparent what the underlying sadness was.

My cultural background is African American and Latina. In regard to both sides of my family, mental illness is something we did not discuss and something we definitely did not seek help for.

Growing up with my African American family, I was absolutely forbidden to seek out help from a mental health professional. Statements such as "Folks are going to label you as 'crazy,' or Why would you want to talk about your business or our family business to a complete stranger?" Even speaking on the subject of someone in the family that possibly could be living with a mental health condition was considered "taboo". The family would just accept that individual as being "special" or "the odd duck" of the family. It was not a subject to be spoken about. That is how the African American side of my family would handle mental illness.

On the other side of my mixed heritage, was my Latina culture. I was also forbidden to seek out help from a mental health professional from this side of the family as well. It was the belief that everyone could be healed through prayer. No matter what the illness was, or even how serious the illness, it was encouraged to just pray and have faith, then you will be cured; or, you have to accept what was in store for your life from the higher power.

I grew up in the 1970's. This was a time when extreme stigma surrounded mental illness of all cultural backgrounds. The thought of someone having a mental illness was associated with being institutionalized. Being institutionalized in a mental health facility was depicted in the 1975 film 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'. In my household, on both sides of my heritage, this movie was the absolute truth of what could happen if any help was sought for anything having to do with mental illness. Because there was not a lot of information or positive statistics at that time, my family would only go by the images/stories that were portrayed within the movies.

In 2008, I started experiencing extreme depression. Three of my family members were diagnosed with mental health conditions. I was dealing with other external conditions that also contributed to my extreme stress. It seemed like, on a daily basis, there was something new that would add to my life in a negative way. This is when I knew I had to go against my cultural upbringing and seek out some professional mental health help. Although suicidal thoughts were present, I knew in my heart, that suicide was not an option.

When I made the decision to start seeing a therapist in regards to my depression and my mental, emotional and physical well-being, I had to do it secretly. I had to hide this information from both sides of my family. And the fact that I started taking medication in order to cope with my day-to-day life was totally out of the question to discuss with anyone. However, I started to feel better. It was like a new world to me. This was a relief from a dark cloud that had been over me for most of my life.

As the clouds lifted and my understanding of my mental health grew, my therapist recommended that I seek out this organization called NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). She told me, that it would not only help me, but it would also help me to understand and communicate better with my family members that are living with mental health conditions.

My initial contact with NAMI was a phone call speaking to an individual that listened to my complaints, my fears, my anger and frustration and just let me cry until I got it all out of my system. This individual then signed me up for the twelve-week [Family-to-Family](#) class being offered for free through their NAMI affiliation. She also provided me with directions to the support groups, ([Family Support Group](#)) that were being offered. She reassured me that I was not alone and that I would be accepted culturally as well.

Attending NAMI's classes and support groups opened up a whole new world to me. It also made me know that culturally, I am not alone. I also realized that I had to develop my voice in speaking out against the stigma within my life, my family and my two different cultural backgrounds.

From the stand point of my African American heritage, I learned to seek help and talk about my mental illness. This not only helps me, but I am also helping others understand that recovery is possible. And from the perception of my Latina heritage, it's okay to pray for my illness to get better, but it is also okay to seek the help I need in order to maintain a healthy, stable state of recovery.

I work in a multicultural environment at NAMI McHenry County. Within our organization we assist individuals from all cultural, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Here at NAMI MC our focus is to [break the stigma surrounding mental illness across all cultural backgrounds](#).

Checkout our website: namimchenrycounty.org

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