



NAMI MERCER REACHES OUT TO AFRICAN AMERICANS

By Madeline Monheit and Elisabeth Hagen

“It’s time for us to come out of the dark ages in dealing with mental illness,” declares Reverend Dr. John H. Harris, Jr., pastor of the predominantly African American Galilee Baptist Church in Trenton.”

NAMI Mercer, an affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is partnering with Rev. Harris and other like-minded community leaders to improve the lives of African Americans affected by mental illness.

Although society as a whole is beginning to overcome stigma against mental illness, the subject remains taboo in much of the black community. Mental illness affects persons of all races and ethnicities, but culture plays an important role in how people express symptoms and how they respond to these symptoms in others. Cultural standards also determine if specific behaviors are considered “normal” or “abnormal” and influence access to and acceptance of mental health services

The experience of slavery explains why some blacks choose to suffer in silence. “In African American communities,” explains Kimme Carlos, “stigma’s handmaidens—denial and secrecy—were self-protective attitudes discouraging admissions of weakness.” Ms. Carlos, a recovering alcoholic with a family history of mental illness, is a NAMI Mercer teacher and outreach coordinator.

In addition, the negative social circumstances that place black Americans at high risk for mental illness (disproportionate poverty, lack of health insurance, homelessness, incarceration, children in foster care) make them unlikely to seek help from “the establishment,” especially since only two percent of psychiatrists and psychologists and four percent of social workers are black. When coping with mental illness, African American families are more likely to turn to their church for support.

For these reasons, NAMI Mercer reaches out with cultural awareness. “Our overall plan is to find out how we can be most effective in minority groups by overcoming language and cultural barriers,” explains Tom Tompkins, NAMI Mercer’s volunteer coordinator.

To improve its outreach to the black community, NAMI National recently developed “Sharing Hope,” a program for educating congregations about mental illness. NAMI Mercer was honored to host the first pilot in Trenton in 2008 at Galilee Baptist Church. NAMI Mercer plans to offer Sharing Hope to three other congregations this year.

Through a one-hour scripted presentation, Sharing Hope aims to increase understanding, de-stigmatize mental illness, and show that treatment is effective and recovery is possible.

“In just 60 minutes, the Galileans became more comfortable talking in their own church about mental illness,” recalls Sally Osmer, executive director of NAMI Mercer. “They started the all-important next step—to talk about how they, as a congregation, can be more welcoming and helpful to families and individuals.”

Sharing Hope also introduces NAMI education, support, and advocacy programs to the audience. One such program is In Our Own Voice (IOOV), a unique public education program, in which two trained consumer speakers share compelling personal stories about living with mental illness and achieving recovery. To ensure cultural competency, African Americans speak in their own community.

Galen Valley gives several IOOV presentations each month to recovery groups in Trenton, including the Salvation Army and Rescue Mission. “When I say: ‘Four years ago, I was where you’re at; I just happen to be doing better at the moment,’ I get their attention.”

A recovering drug abuser who spent many years on the street, Galen designed and produces *The Voice*, the quarterly journal of the Association for Advancement of Mental Health (AAMH).

NAMI Mercer also offers its signature Family-to-Family (FTF) education course at least once a year in Trenton. The course provides the knowledge and skills that family members need to cope more effectively with mental illness at home. Classes are taught by trained, empathetic family members who have experienced mental illness in their own families.

Kimme Carlos, who taught the first FTF at Shiloh Baptist Church, remarks how black men are often dragged to class “kicking and screaming” by their wives. Men believe that they should be able to fix problems, including mental illness. “In class, they realize that the illness doesn’t happen because they have been lousy fathers. The course empowers them, and best of all, they build lasting friendships.”

For more information about NAMI Mercer outreach programs or to schedule a presentation, call 609-799-8994 or visit www.namimercer.org.

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