

COMMUNITY NEWS



APA Deputy Medical Director and Director of the Division of Diversity and Health Equity, Annelle Primm, M.D., M.P.H., welcomes attendees via a video recording to “Black and Blue: The State of African American Mental Health” held April 11 in Baltimore. Primm said that the “program exemplifies what OMNA on Tour is all about: convening community leaders from a wide array of backgrounds, disciplines, and perspectives to learn together and initiate a dialogue about mental health disparities and what can be done to prevent and eliminate them.”



Carol Moore, M.S., R.N.C., provides comic relief to the conference as she emphasizes how laughter can help reduce mental distress.

African-American MH Concerns Addressed at Baltimore Forum

Experts say it’s time to make mental health care an essential component in the lives of African Americans.

BY VABREN WATTS

Although more efforts have been set in motion to address the often unspoken presence of mental illness in the black community, mental health professionals are determined, more than ever, to keep this topic at the forefront of

Williams, who was raised and has a clinical practice in New York City, explained to conference attendees that African Americans face many hardships that affect mental health, ranging from racism to inner-city violence—yet many do not seek help.

Williams told *Psychiatric News* that it is impossible to quickly recover from traumatic events, such as witnessing a shooting, stabbing, or murder without receiving professional mental health care. “The mental health repercussions of these experiences will present themselves, either immediately or later in life,” said Williams.

While the National Institute of Mental Health reports similar rates for mental illness among African Americans and the general population, African Americans are more likely to be burdened with disability associated with mental illness—stemming from lack of health insurance, absence of available services in the areas where many may reside, and a cultural stigma associated with mental health treatment.

Earlise Ward, Ph.D., a psychologist and an associate professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explained that culturally competent care is crucial in improving utilization of mental health services by African Americans.

“Treatments for depression that are culturally sensitive tend to be four times more effective than the ‘one size fits all’ method,” Ward told *Psychiatric News*.

According to Ward, efficacies of mental health treatments have been historically based on findings from white populations, with little or no incorporation of data from racial minority groups, as well as their beliefs, traditions, and value systems.

Data from research conducted by Ward and colleagues showed that treatment of African Americans for depression was more effective when they were being treated by clinicians of the same race, participated in regular group-therapy sessions, and were able



Mental health care professionals listen to presentations at the OMNA on Tour event focused on the mental health of African Americans in urban areas.

to incorporate their personal religious beliefs.

“African Americans want to feel as though they are not struggling with mental illness alone, and [many] still want prayer to remain the first line of coping with mental illness. These findings are very important,” Ward stated. “It’s time to make changes and rally for mental health and illness as very essential issues in African Americans,” she told the audience.

Other event speakers included Jean Smith, M.D., a clinical specialist with the Maryland Department of Mental Hygiene, who spoke on the warning signs of mental illness; and Carol Moore, M.S., R.N.C., an educational specialist at the Peninsula Regional Medical Center in Salisbury, Md., who discussed the benefits of laughter during periods of stress. The event also set a stage for community attendees to discuss openly their personal struggles with mental illness.

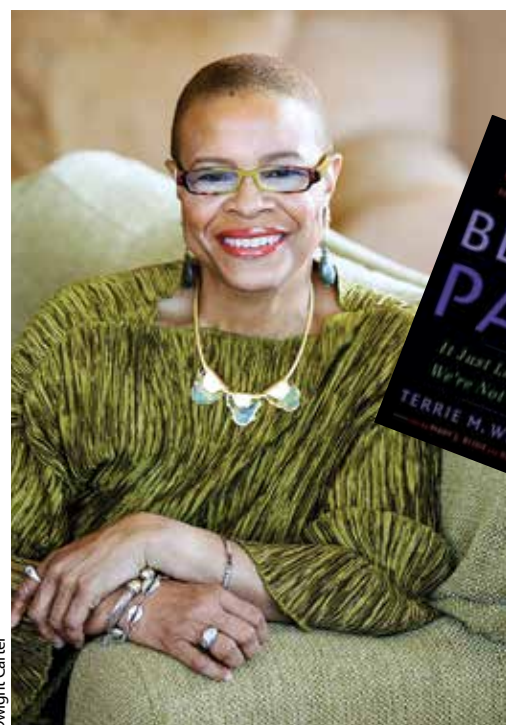
In speaking with *Psychiatric News*, Cynthia Major-Lewis, M.D., director of the Psychiatry Emergency Services at Johns Hopkins Hospital, who gave an overview of the racial disparities concerning the incidence of postpartum depression, said, “I’ve been in practice and going to conferences for 13 years. It was so impressive to see so many people feeling comfortable enough to give testimonies of their experiences with mental illness. We are really beginning to make some headway in the right direction to end mental health stigma



Earlise Ward, Ph.D., speaks about culturally competent approaches, such as incorporation of religious beliefs, to more effectively treat depression in African Americans.



A conference attendee relates her personal story about mental illness.



Terrie Williams, L.C.S.W., author of *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*, discussed how exposure to inner-city violence can have negative consequences on mental health.

conversations pertaining to the health of African Americans.

Last month mental health professionals from around the nation gathered in Baltimore to discuss mental health care, or the lack thereof, among African Americans in urban communities.

“We are in great need of understanding the importance of our mental and emotional health,” said Terrie Williams, L.C.S.W., author of the book *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting* and keynote speaker at “Black and Blue: The State of African American Mental Health,” the inaugural event of this year’s OMNA on Tour series, sponsored by APA’s Division of Diversity and Health Equity.

in the black community.” **PN**

More information on the OMNA on Tour programs is posted at <http://www.psychiatry.org/practice/professional-interests/diversity/omna-on-tour-meetings>.