



NEWS RELEASE

Media contact: Allison Inman
Senior Director, Office of Communications
allison.inman@vayahealth.com
828-225-2785, ext. 5364

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 14, 2020

Mental health advocates focus on trauma of racism

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – This July, Vaya Health is encouraging conversations on the impact of racism on mental health and spreading the word about local treatment resources in recognition of Black, Indigenous and People of Color Mental Health Awareness Month.

Initially called Minority Mental Health Awareness Month, the observance was created in 2008 to bring awareness to the unique mental health struggles that underrepresented groups face in the United States. Recent events have turned national attention to longstanding effects of racism, including physical health effects such as higher COVID-19 infection and death rates among people of color.

Racism is also a mental health issue because it causes trauma. The word “trauma” often brings to mind a frightening event or disaster, but it can be any deeply distressing or disturbing experience.

Racial trauma can occur due to daily discrimination and bigotry, according to Mental Health America (MHA). It also can be carried throughout generations due to historical adversities, violence and oppression.

Trauma is a frequent cause of multiple mental health conditions, with depression the most commonly reported condition among people of color, according to MHA. Black adults are 20 percent more likely to report serious psychological distress than adult whites, and native and Indigenous American adults have the highest reported rate of mental illnesses, MHA states.

Getting effective treatment can present additional challenges for people of color. Non-native English speakers may have difficulty connecting with a mental health professional who knows their language and culture. The American Psychological Association reports that less than 2 percent of its members are Black, and some worry that mental health care providers don’t understand their specific issues. Stigma and stereotypes may prevent people from seeking help for fear of being considered “crazy”.

Conditions such as depression or anxiety are serious, but they usually do not require hospitalization and can be treated through counseling, medication or both. The first step is discussing what you are feeling with a trained professional who can diagnose your symptoms and help you develop a treatment plan.

“As Black people, for example, we have to be the keepers of our own wellness,” said Lisa Besses, a licensed clinical mental health counselor, Vaya’s contract performance director and vice chair of the organization’s Diversity & Inclusion Committee. “Seeking help requires a great deal of trust in ourselves and in what resources

are available. It will not be easy, but it is necessary for our healing to access the courage and reach out for support.”

Based in Asheville, Vaya manages Medicaid and other publicly funded services for mental health needs, substance use disorder and intellectual/developmental disabilities in 22 counties in western North Carolina. To learn more about treatment options near you, call Vaya’s toll-free, 24/7 Access to Care Line at 1-800-849-6127. All calls are confidential.

Anyone in western North Carolina, regardless of insurance carrier or status, can call Vaya day or night for help in a mental health or substance use health crisis.

To learn more about mental health issues and people of color, visit the following online resources:

- Mental Health America: www.mhanational.org/bipoc-mental-health
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): <https://www.nami.org/get-involved/awareness-events/minority-mental-health-awareness-month>
- Black Emotional and Mental Health (BEAM): www.beam.community

About Vaya Health

Based in Asheville, N.C., Vaya Health manages public funds for mental health, substance use disorder and intellectual or developmental disability services in 22 western North Carolina counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey. Access to care and crisis assistance are available 24/7 at 1-800-849-6127. Learn more at www.vayahealth.com.

###