

# It's past time to get rid of the embarrassment of mental illness

By Merlene Davis

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Evelyn Morton has been working through depression all of her life. In the past, when the mood swings came, she isolated herself, choosing to hide her condition rather than reveal it. That may have been a good thing.

The black community has not been very supportive of those with mental illness, even though we experience rates of mental health issues similar to those of the general population. Blacks sometimes consider mental illness a weakness, which is why only about a third of those in need of treatment seek it.

Labeled by some in society as the weakest link in all humanity, blacks don't want to admit a personal frailty, supposedly diminishing that link even more.

Fortunately, Morton is over all of that silly thinking.

She has been working with the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Lexington, earning certificates in mental illness first aid, in suicide prevention and in advocacy, so she can help educate others.

"I have lived in Lexington all my life, 63 years," she said. "My family is very prominent. I can make a difference."

Indeed.

Morton's sister, Lula Morton Drewes, was the first black student to enroll at Transylvania University in 1963. Drewes became a clinical psychologist and wellness coach practicing in Germany and the United States.

Still visiting in Lexington since she was honored in September by Transylvania on the 50th anniversary of her enrollment, Drewes wrote a message to NAMI Lexington, which is posted on its website.

"We gain power and open up possibilities for help and healing when we stop hiding our mental health problems and start to talk about feelings like sadness, depression, fear, anxiety, panic, helplessness, nervousness, guilt and stress."

The headline on her text is the African proverb, "We cannot heal what we conceal."

"In general, rather than focusing on the problems and what's not working, more and more people are finding that courage," Drewes said. "It's OK to talk about it."

And that is how NAMI is helping her sister, she said.

"What NAMI has been for her is an organization that is a proactive initiative that helps people feel they are not alone," Drewes said.

That's because they aren't alone.

About one in four Americans suffer with a mental health issue to a varying degree.

In the minority community, poverty, racism, illness and violence are contributing stressors, according to mental health experts. And blacks relied on friends and family members who told them their issues would blow over, or they sought the counsel of pastors, who often supplied a stock answer for them to pray.

Education and awareness of mental illness are changing that.

Morton, who said she had been unaware of NAMI until recent weeks, is now in training to take the reins of the Multicultural Action Council, which reaches out to minority communities with information and education.

"God places you in places you need to be," she said.

Drewes said working at NAMI is a perfect fit for her sister, who is a natural, intuitive psychologist.



"Her personal experience and her gifts" will serve her well, she said.

Even Washington is getting in on the act. Last year, at a White House National Conference on Mental Health, President Barack Obama said, "You see commercials on TV about a whole array of physical health issues, some of them very personal. And yet, we whisper about mental health issues and avoid asking too many questions.

"There should be no shame in discussing or seeking help for treatable illnesses that affect too many people that we love," he said. "We've got to get rid of that embarrassment; we've got to get rid of that stigma."

Kelly Gunning, NAMI Lexington director of operations, agreed. "We cannot continue to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. It's got to stop."

Morton is ready to do her part. "I hope my new position will allow me to get out, not just to the black community, but to all communities to tell people about this organization."

In honor of Black History Month, reach out to someone who is hurting and help them find the professional help they need.