

Doubly Invisible: Shedding Light on Mental Health and Marginalization

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I am a psychologist who studies and practices social justice advocacy in my professional life. I have observed all too often that members of marginalized communities struggling with mental health issues are doubly invisible. First, during conversations about health, people often forget about mental health, an integral piece of the wellness puzzle. As a psychologist, I agree wholeheartedly with the adage that there is no health without mental health. Second, when mental health issues are brought to the fore, marginalized groups (e.g., women, religious minorities, economically disadvantaged, racial/ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, undocumented individuals, LGBTQIA+, and indigenous communities) are left out of the conversation.

There is impressive literature linking experiences with discrimination to lower psychological well-being, increased rates of mental illness, and physical health problems like hypertension and heart disease. Psychologists and other researchers have documented clear health and mental health disparities among marginalized individuals. Reading this research along with continuous news headlines about discrimination and oppression may lead you to feel helpless, sad, anxious, or angry.

As a scientist-practitioner-advocate who cares deeply about client well-being and social justice, I believe it is crucial to shed light on the relationship between mental health and marginalization. Oppression and discrimination come in various forms and flavors, ranging from outright racism, sexism, and ableism, to subtle indignities and snubs called “microaggressions.” For example, a White storeowner may unconsciously worry that an African American young man may be a criminal, and treat this customer differently because of his race. There is reason to believe that a lifetime of subtle mistreatment because of one’s social group may lead to mental health problems. Indeed, some research on microaggressions suggests that this chronic racism may be more damaging than isolated incidents of “old fashioned” racism (e.g., racial slurs). Also, oppression can also be systemic, as evidenced by discriminatory hiring practices, or academic policies that favor those in the majority group.

In today’s increasingly complex and fast-moving world, it is important for us to slow down and see one another as humans who are products of our environments. We need to understand each other’s life circumstances, and the context in which we experience suffering. Becoming a social justice advocate for those in marginalized communities is a very important way of making sure that mental health matters for *all* humans.

Here are 10 tips for becoming a social justice advocate for mental health for marginalized communities:

- 1) If you are a member of a marginalized community (or a member of a privileged community for that matter), ask yourself, how will you engage in self-care as you do advocacy work? Doing advocacy work can be exhausting, so consider ways of connecting with like minded individuals, and “recharging” your battery when necessary. You may need to take periodic breaks to sustain your efforts.
- 2) If you are a member of a privileged group (e.g., white, male, upper class, etc.), take time to take stock of your privilege, and engage in some self-reflection prior to engaging in advocacy. What are your beliefs, values, skills, and attitudes about

- mental health, marginalized communities, and advocacy? Check out this resource on exploring privilege: <http://www.div17.org/resources/exploring-privilege/>
- 3) Learn about mental health issues that diverse communities face. Check out: <http://www.apa.org/> or <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Diverse-Communities> for more information and support. You can read more about mental health disparities here: <http://www.apa.org/advocacy/health-disparities/health-care-reform.aspx>
 - 4) Do you know who represents you at local (e.g., mayor/city council) and congressional levels? You can sign up for your congressman's newsletters and get updates about bills that affect you. You can also call your congressman or senator regarding legislative issues that influence minority communities. Check these website for more information: [APA Public Interest](#) and [APA Public Interest & Government Relations](#). You can even put your congressman's phone number in your phone for easy speed dial. **J**
 - 5) Attend community events, marches, or protests that support the rights of individuals from marginalized communities including immigrants. Seek out national and local organizations that work on causes that you support.
 - 6) Consume media (TV, social media, podcasts, etc.) that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, social justice, and inclusion with regard to mental health issues. Consider following organizations on social media that share information related to marginalized communities and mental health (e.g., "DACA").
 - 7) Volunteer or donate your time or money to local organizations that provide mental health services to individuals from marginalized communities.
 - 8) Commit to sharing your voice with those around you, including your children, parents, relatives, friends and coworkers.
 - 9) New research on "microaffirmations" has highlighted ways of promoting inclusiveness and diversity. Learn more here: [Microaffirmations](#)
 - 10) If you belong to a house of worship or community group, consider engaging in advocacy alongside "like minded" individuals. Also, there is reason to believe that prayer and exercising your spirituality can serve as a form of coping should you become disheartened.

While oppression can take a toll on mental health, there is reason to believe that social advocacy can promote positive psychological functioning! Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Advocacy can occur in big or small ways, and you have the ability to shed light on mental health issues among marginalized communities, and make a difference. During the month of May, we remember that Mental Health Matters For All. I hope that you feel empowered this month and always to shed light where there is darkness, and make positive changes for yourself, the community, and the world.

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