Mental Health in the Black Family During the Holidays

Gina Newsome Duncan, MD

Eastover Psychological and Psychiatric Group, P.A.

December 15, 2022

Purpose of MHTTC

The purpose of the MHTTC Network is technology transfer - disseminating and implementing evidence-based practices for mental disorders into the field.

Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the MHTTC Network includes 10 Regional Centers, a National American Indian and Alaska Native Center, a National Hispanic and Latino Center, and a Network Coordinating Office.

Our collaborative network supports resource development and dissemination, training and technical assistance, and workforce development for the mental health field. We work with systems, organizations, and treatment practitioners involved in the delivery of mental health services to strengthen their capacity to deliver effective evidence-based practices to individuals.
Our services cover the full continuum spanning mental illness prevention, treatment, and recovery support.

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATING IN THEIR OWN JOURNEYS

STRENGTHS-BASED AND HOPEFUL

PERSON-FIRST AND FREE OF LABELS

INCLUSIVE AND ACCEPTING OF DIVERSE CULTURES, GENDERS, PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES

NON-JUDGMENTAL AND AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

RESPECTFUL, CLEAR AND UNDERSTANDABLE

HEALING-CENTERED AND TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

CONSISTENT WITH OUR ACTIONS, POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

MHTTC Network

Central East Region 3

Delaware
District of Columbia
Maryland
Pennsylvania
Virginia
West Virginia

PA
MD
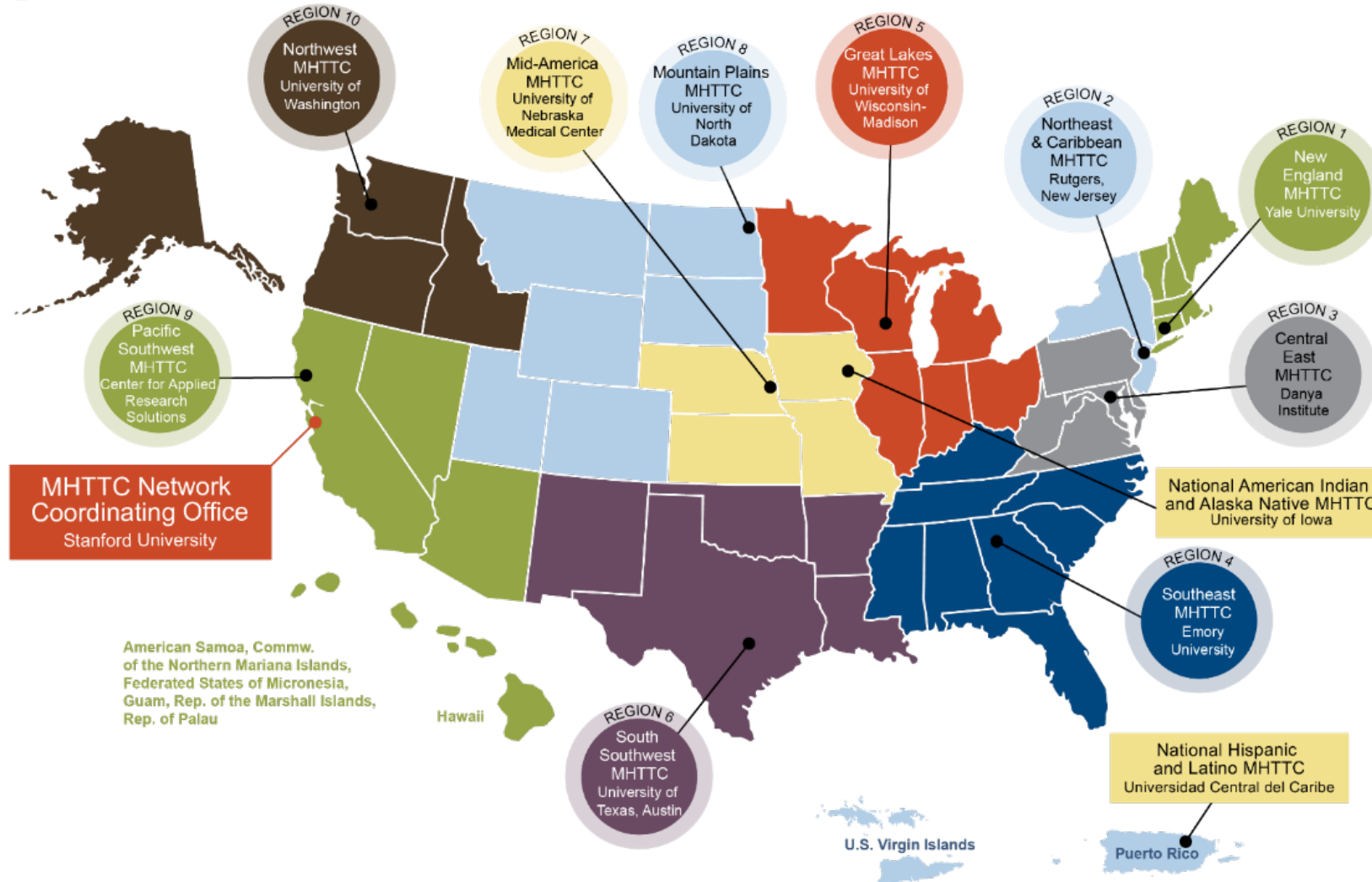DC
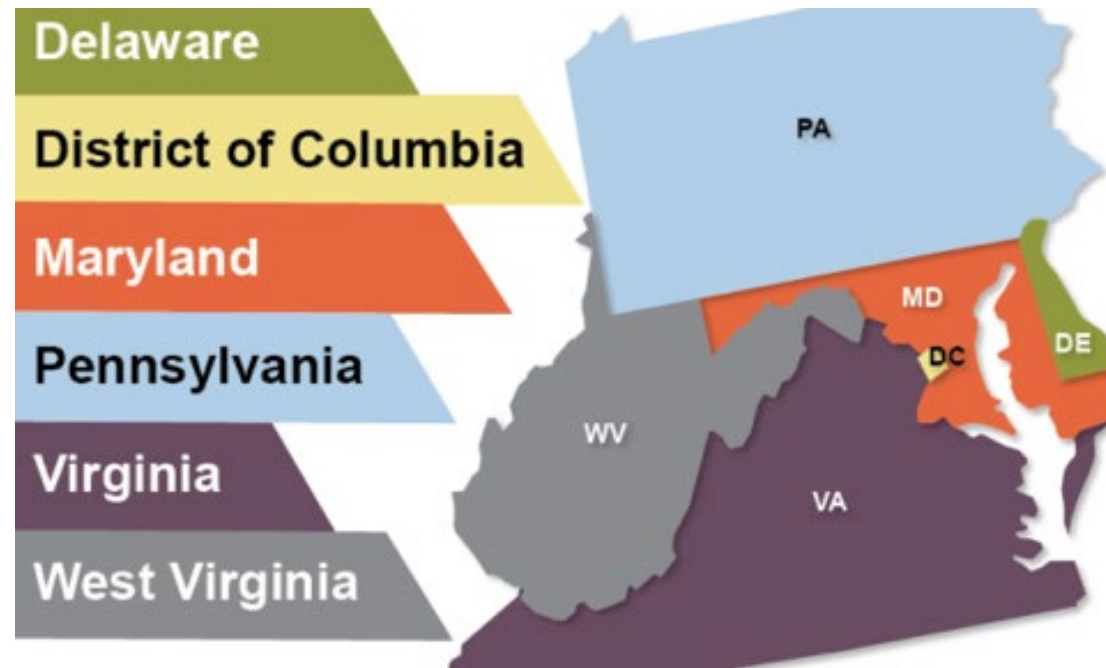DE
WV
VA

Central East (HHS Region 3)

MHTTC Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Acknowledgment

Mental Health and the Black Family During the Holidays

Presenter: Gina Newsome Duncan, MD
Eastover Psychological and Psychiatric Group, P.A.
Charlotte, NC

Moderator: Annelle B. Primm, MD, MPH
Council of Elders, Black Psychiatrists of America
Baltimore, MD

December 15, 2022

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

MHTTC
Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
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Mental Health and the Black Family During the Holidays

- The holidays can heighten the stress Black families face due to the pandemic, economic adversity, and community violence.

- Black families have many cultural assets to draw upon to withstand these stressors, get through the holidays, and maintain their mental health and well-being.

- We thank CE-MHTTC for their partnership on the BPA Health Equity Webinar series.

- Content has both Central East region and national relevance.

- Our featured speaker is Gina Newsome Duncan, MD

"It's the most wonderful time of the year..."

(...but it can also be one of the most stressful times of the year.)

Learning Objectives

- To discuss stress and mental health challenges that may arise during the winter holiday season

- To explore factors unique to the Black community that impact mental health and how these factors can affect holiday stress

- To present strategies for reducing stress and promoting mental wellness in Black families this holiday season and throughout the year

U.S. Mental Health Statistics

- Mental illnesses are common in the United States

- Nearly one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness (52.9 million in 2020)

- 2020 prevalence of any mental illness (AMI):
  - 2 or More Races 35.8%
  - White Americans 22.6%
  - Hispanic Americans 18.4%
  - Black or African American 17.3%
  - Asian American 13.9%

Source

Black Mental Health

- African Americans are 20 percent more likely to experience serious psychological distress than white Americans

Burden of Mental Illness

- African Americans experience a higher burden associated with mental illness:
  - More chronic disease
  - Higher levels of disability
  - Higher rates of inpatient service use
  - Lower rates of outpatient mental health service use
  - More barriers to seeking mental health treatment
  - Less likely to receive guideline-based care for depression and anxiety

Primm et al 2010
Ward et al 2013

Rising Suicide Rates – Black Youth

- **November 2019 Study in *Pediatrics* by Lindsey et al.**

- Almost 10 percent of Black students reported attempting suicide compared with just over 6 percent of their white peers

- Although suicide attempts among white teens decreased between 1991 and 2017, suicide attempts rose among Black teenagers during that time frame

- In 2017, suicide was the leading cause of death among Black young people ages 15 to 24

Source

Barriers to Mental Health Care

- **Structural**
  - Cost of care, lack of medical insurance coverage
  - Geographic accessibility to mental health professionals
- **Individual/Community-level**
  - Mistrust of medical community
  - Limited mental health literacy
  - Cultural factors
  - Stigma
- **Provider-level**
  - Lack of culturally appropriate, culturally sensitive care
  - Stigmatizing behaviors
  - Shortage of providers of color

Primm et al 2010

Racism & Black Mental Health

- After the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, rates of both anxiety and depression increased among Black Americans, according to a joint survey by the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau conducted in four phases in 2020 and 2021.

- Exposure to racism or self-perceived experiences with racism increase the likelihood that a person will develop clinical depression, according to research published in February 2019 in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment.*

Source

- Stress and mental health challenges that may arise during the winter holiday season

Mental Health During the Holidays

- According to the American Psychological Association, 38% of people surveyed said their stress increased during the holiday season

Challenges to Mental Health During the Holiday Season

- Grief & Loss

- Loneliness

- Pressure to have the "perfect" holiday

- Managing others' expectations of what one should/should not be doing

- Social obligations

- Pressures to overspend

- Non-dominant religious tradition

- Frustration with commercialization

- Challenging Family Dynamics
  - LGBTQ+
  - Differing religious practices
  - Unaddressed trauma
- Work & School pressures/deadlines
- COVID travel concerns/differences in comfort with gathering
- Loss of Sunlight
- Pre-existing Mental Health Conditions

21

Common responses to holiday & winter season stress

- "Winter Blues"
- Desire to stay indoors & minimize activity
- Overeating
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Irritability

Mental Health During the Holidays

- The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) noted that 64% of individuals living with a mental illness felt that their conditions worsened around the holidays

Depression vs. MDD

- ***d*epression = a state of feeling sad**

vs.

- ***D*epression = Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)**

Depression = 2+ weeks of:

- Depressed mood
- Sleep issues
- Loss of interest
- Guilt
- Lack of energy

- Concentration difficulties
- Appetite changes
- Slowed down thoughts and physical activity
- Suicidal thoughts or plans

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

- The percentage of people in the United States who struggle with SAD ranges from 1.5% in southern Florida to 9% in northern states

26

MDD or SAD during the Holidays

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Feeling burdened by holiday plans rather than excited
- Turning down invitations for holiday gatherings
- Preferring to stay home alone rather than visit with loved ones
- Spending excessive time in bed
- Crying spells
- Irritability

Bipolar Disorder or Manic Depression

Major Depressive Episodes
- Depressed mood
- Sleep issues
- Loss of interest
- Guilt
- Lack of energy
- Concentration difficulties
- Appetite changes
- Slowed down thoughts and physical activity
- Suicidal thoughts or plans

Manic/Hypomanic Episodes
- Elevated or irritable mood
- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased energy
- More productive activity
- More talkative
- Reckless behavior/spending

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

Bipolar Disorder during the Holidays

- Overspending/buying very expensive gifts
- Going over the top with decorating
- Starting lots of projects
- Pulling all-nighters
- Being more talkative or energetic
- Being unusually social, outgoing or flirtatious
- Risky sexual behavior
- Substance abuse

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

- 6+ months of excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events or activities

- Associated with three or more of the following:
  - Restlessness/feeling on edge
  - Being easily fatigued
  - Difficulty concentrating/mind going blank
  - Irritability
  - Muscle tension
  - Sleep disturbance

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

Anxiety Disorders during the Holidays

- Avoidance of social gatherings

- Avoidance of travel

- Excessive worry about safety during travel

- Difficulty being in the moment and enjoying activities

- Feeling easily overwhelmed

- Excessive alcohol/substance use to self-medicate

- Impact of COVID and racial trauma → fear of leaving our "safe spaces"

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

Other Mental Health Conditions

- Substance Use Disorders

- Eating Disorders
  - Binge Eating Disorder, Anorexia, Bulimia

- Trauma/PTSD
  - Triggers → Leaving a gathering early or avoidance of gatherings altogether, emotional outbursts/sudden changes in mood or behavior, overwhelmed

- Factors unique to the Black community that impact mental health and how these factors can affect holiday stress

African American World Views

"African American world-views are concerned with family and group survival in American society."

Kennedy & Jenkins 2018

34

Collectivist culture embedded in an Individualistic society

- Collectivist cultural values/strengths
  - Social support
  - Being other-focused rather than individually-focused
  - Central importance of spirituality and religion

Duncan & Gogineni 2018

Resilience

"Despite experiences of significant discrimination and oppression, people of color in the United States have demonstrated considerable ingenuity, drawing from their own unique cultural traditions—*emphasizing family, community and collectivist principles; using spiritual and religious perspectives to make meaning of adversity; engaging in deliberate practices to instill ethnic identity and pride—to become resilient.*"

Duncan & Gogineni 2018

Barriers to Mental Health Care

- Structural
  - Cost of care, lack of medical insurance coverage
  - Geographic accessibility to mental health professionals

- **Individual/Community-level**
  - Mistrust of medical community
  - Limited mental health literacy
  - Cultural factors
  - Stigma

- Provider-level
  - Lack of culturally appropriate, culturally sensitive care
  - Stigmatizing behaviors
  - Shortage of providers of color

Individual/Community Level Barriers: Limited mental health literacy

- Experiences of struggle & stress are pervasive in the Black Community

    → *how do you know when stress or sadness (during the holidays or at other times of the year) has crossed the line to major depression?*

Conner et al 2010

Individual/Community Level Barriers: Limited mental health literacy (cont.d)

- "…African Americans tend to use functional impairment rather than epidemiologically defined symptoms to determine the need for treatment"

Molock et al 2008

Individual/Community Level Barriers: Limited mental health literacy (cont.d)

- **Difficulty recognizing "Big 'D' Depression"**

*"It was hard to just recognize at first ... I was so busy being a provider, so I didn't realize ... you know, sometimes we don't realize that we do need help."*

-Ms. N.,73 years old

Conner et al 2010

Mental Illness Stigma

"…one of the most significant barriers to mental health treatment and contributes to poor quality care, particularly for African Americans"

Gary 2005
Conner et al 2010

41

Individual/Community Level Barriers: The Impact of Multiple, Concurrent Stigmas
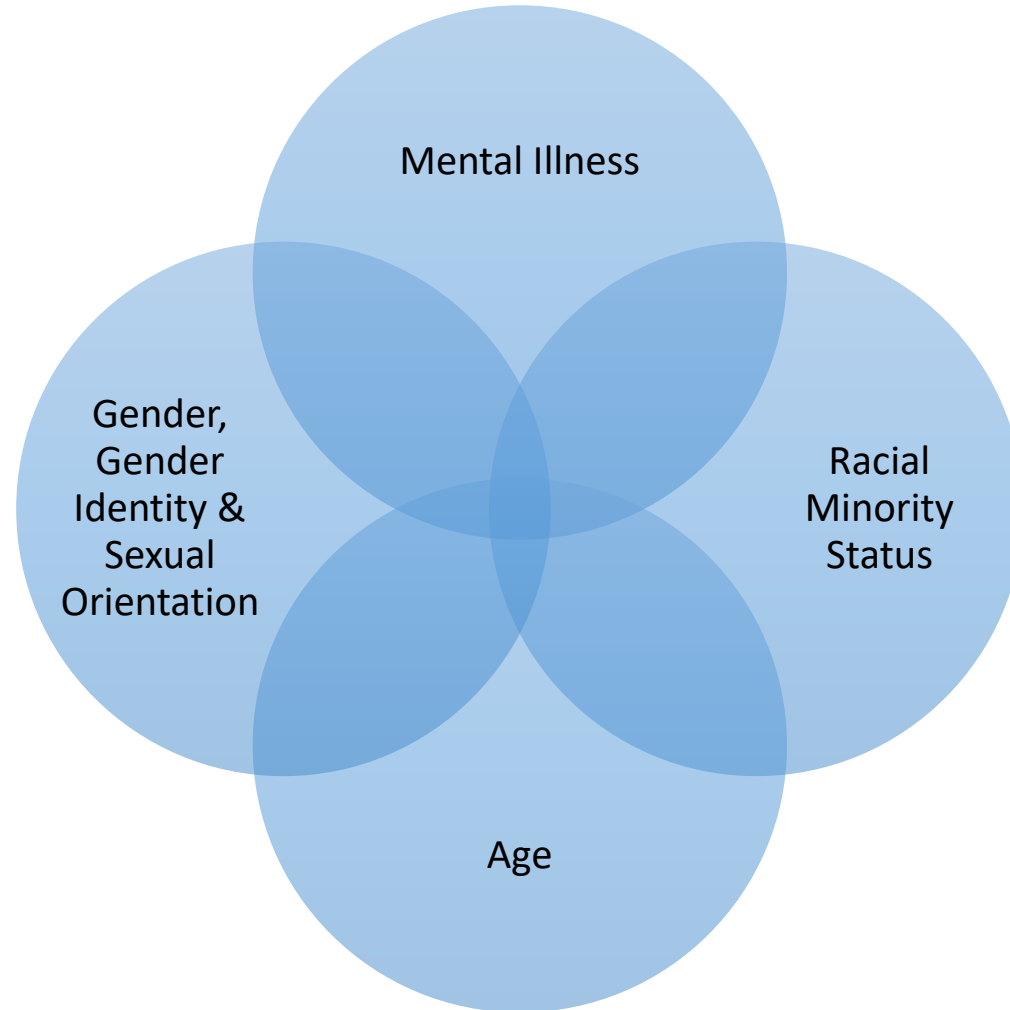
"What happens in this house…"

Individual/Community Level Barriers: The Impact of Cultural Factors

- Faith/Spirituality & Religion

- The "Strong Black Woman"

"Let Go and Let God."

Religious Coping as Preferred Method for Mental Health

- Ward et al (2009) found that African American women would use religious coping to deal with a mental health problem over seeking professional treatment
  - Prayer
  - Developing a relationship with God
  - Talking to a pastor

Ward et al 2013

The "Strong Black Woman"

- Cultural symbol of Black women's strength that has its roots in slavery

- Strength
- Self-reliance
- Independence
- **Ability to take care of others in the face of unending struggle**

Baker 2017

The "Strong Black Woman": Double-Edged Sword

- Adherence to SBW stereotype prompts African American women to use **self-reliance & self-silencing** as coping strategies in response to stressors

- Allows coping with daily stressors from racism, sexism, classism
- But prevents full acknowledgment and acceptance of needs and emotions
- Deters help-seeking both professionally *and socially/personally* for fear of being seen as weak

Watson & Hunter 2015
Baker 2017

- Strategies for reducing stress and promoting mental wellness in Black families this holiday season and throughout the year

Tips for Minimizing Holiday Stress

- Get centered around the meaning of the season
- Set healthy expectations
- Set boundaries around spending
- Make space for uncomfortable emotions
- Use Social Media in healthy ways
- Use Positive Self-Talk
- Prioritize sleep, healthy eating and exercise
- Use music as therapy/create positive playlists
- Participate in lower-stress seasonal activities
- Avoid self-medicating with substances & food
- Use Mindfulness techniques to stay in the moment

Clinical Tips

- Be Proactive!
- Increase frequency of visits during the winter months
- Discuss proactive medication adjustments
- Consider light therapy
- Check Vitamin D levels
- Refer for additional therapy support – family therapy, trauma therapy, IOP, PHP
- Make connections with community resources & programs that are culturally-relevant and affirming
  - Church and Faith-based organizations
  - Community Kwanzaa celebrations

Managing Pre-existing Mental Health Conditions & Emotional Challenges

- MDD

- SAD

- Anxiety

- BPAD

- PTSD

- Eating Disorders

- Substance Use Disorders

- Grief

- Loneliness

Managing Stressful Family Dynamics

- DON'T
  - Minimize the impact of trauma
  - Ignore re-traumatization
  - Attempt to hash everything out at once

Managing Stressful Family Dynamics (Cont.d)

- DO
  - Be proactive/have a game plan
  - Confide in a trusted family member or friend who can serve as an ally or support
  - Gently challenge stigma
  - Use religious language effectively
  - Model healthy conversations & behavior
  - Focus on common ground, not divisive topics
  - Strive to cultivate an atmosphere of warmth
  - Share resources/referral information

Online Screening Resources through Mental Health America

- Take a Mental Health Test

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
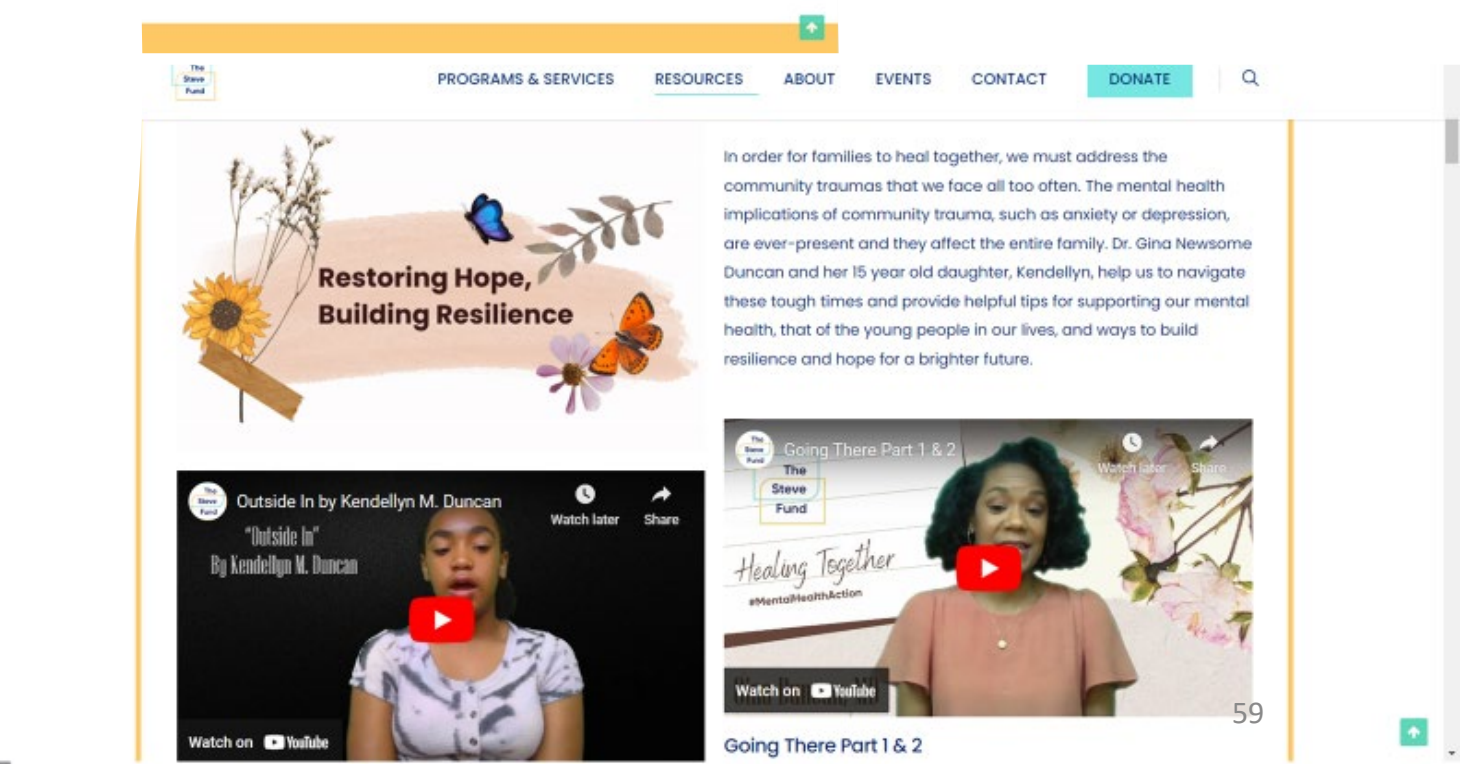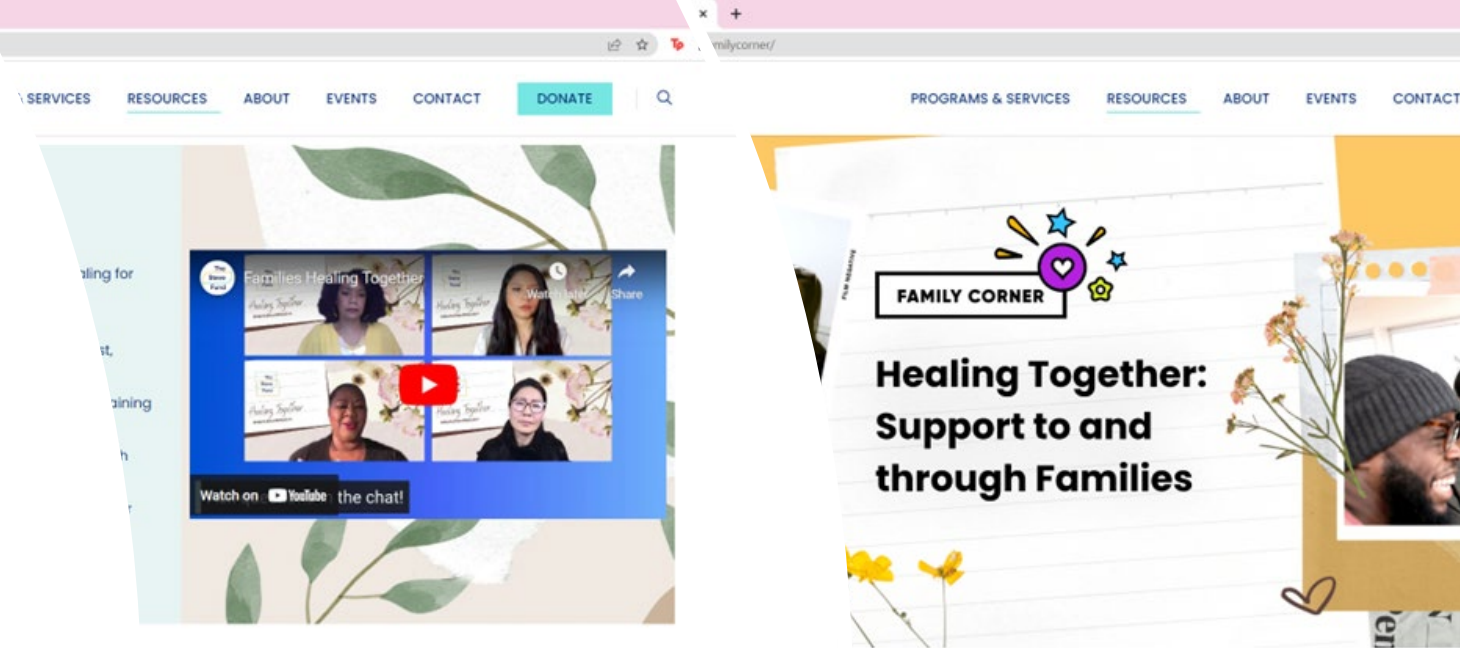
The Steve Fund Crisis Response Website

Final Thoughts:

- *How can we get conversations about mental health started in our families this holiday season?*
- *How can we create emotional safe space for vulnerability and authentic connection?*

THANK YOU!

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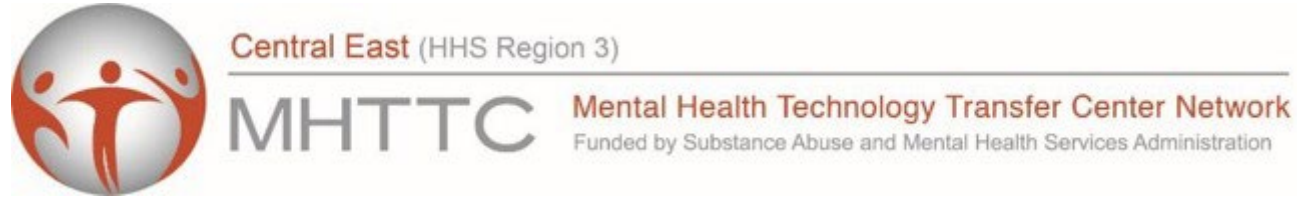# Questions

Appreciation

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Let's connect: