

Engaging Barbers and Stylists to Serve as Mental Health Gatekeepers in Underserved Communities

What is the practice?

Background

According to the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), Black Americans have substantially lower access to mental health and substance-use treatment services despite rates of behavioral health disorders not significantly different from the general population. A majority of Black people agree that “depression is a personal weakness,” which echoes existing research (Ward et al., 2013). Additionally, Black or African American adults were more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year compared with White adults. According to National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Black people do not always receive mental health care when it is needed — about 1 in 3 Black people receive care for their mental health (NAMI (a), n.d.). There are multiple barriers to accessing mental health care within the Black community. While stigma surrounding mental health remains high, access to Black mental health professionals remains a challenge as well (Ward et al., 2013). Only 4% of therapists in the US identify as Black; and among Black therapists, only 4% are Black men. (Lin et al., 2018). Identifying strategies that increase access to quality care and decrease stigma among Black or African Americans remains a priority.

Gatekeepers

In an effort to improve equitable healthcare in marginalized communities, many mental health programs and practices utilize community members to advocate and provide support. Two well-known programs include Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and NAMI Family-to-Family, which train laypeople to become community mental health allies and advocates (MHFA & NAMI (b), n.d.). The benefit of training community members is to improve mental health education and access to care in marginalized communities.

Influential members of a community maintain personal connections between multiple people and can maximize their role as community gatekeepers. They are often uniquely positioned to offer community-delivered support and facilitate information flow in low-resourced areas (Holohan, 2021). Many community gatekeeper models/programs may be under-represented in Black communities or may not engage diverse members of the community. One emerging practice that may hold promise is the use of community leaders, such as barbers and beauticians, to offer support and bridge the gap between unmet mental health needs in African American communities ([Southeast MHTTC](#), 2022).

The Confess Project

Capitalizing on personal relationships in the community, the [Confess Project of America](#) is training barbers and stylists in underserved communities of color to serve as gatekeepers (The Confess Project, n.d.). The Confess Project launched in 2016 after the founder coped with his own mental health and, in turn, wanted to equip Black men and boys with mental health strategies and coping skills (Holohan, 2021). With a mission to promote mental health awareness and stigma reduction within Black communities, this national grassroots mental

health organization trains barbers and stylists with tools to become key community liaisons, build mental health awareness, and advocate for individuals within their respective community.

The Confess Project uses a 4-tiered model to achieve its mission through access, advocacy, research, and innovation (The Confess Project, n.d.).

- **Access:** Equip community leaders to better serve as gatekeepers to mental health resources and treatment options.
- **Advocacy:** Partner with public health experts, therapists, educators, community organizations and political leaders to influence policy while integrating individual lived experiences and peer support to reduce stigma.
- **Research:** Participate in public mental health research relating to marginalized communities and health disparities.
- **Innovation:** Increase virtual programs and opportunities to further assist the mental health of Black communities.

What outcomes does this practice produce?

Early research of the Confess Project suggests the valuable role barbers can play in advocating for increased mental health access and decreased stigma in the Black community. Potential outcomes include:

- training on active listening and positive communication
- increased awareness of mental health literacy and available resources
- self-confidence to advocate for others
- ability to build trust and positive relationships in the community
- reduction in the stigma often associated with having a mental health condition or receiving treatment

What is the evidence for this practice?

While research evidence is limited, a qualitative study conducted by Harvard researchers between September and December 2020 examined the experiences and perspectives regarding mental health, community services, and racial issues of barbers, many of whom received training from the Confess Project. Thirty-two barbers completed one-on-one in-depth phone interviews ranging from roughly 30-90 minutes. Themes from the interviews suggest barbers can be advocates and lifelines for their community. This study also suggests, that as a gatekeeper, barbers who receive mental health training can work to build trust, develop positive relationships, encourage positive mental health, and advocate for access to mental health care and resources within their community (Gelzhiser & Lewis, n.d).

How is this practice implemented?

The Confess Project supports local chapters that train barbers and stylists with the mission of building awareness, reducing stigma, and becoming mental health advocates. This national organization offers multiple mental health intervention trainings, including suicide prevention and interpersonal violence prevention training. “Beyond the Barbershop”, the primary course for barbers and stylists, assists trainees in creating safe spaces in which individuals may feel

empowered to discuss their mental health concerns and seek treatment or resource information. Through this training, individuals gain skills around active listening, validation, positive communication, stigma reduction, and resource location or dissemination, including how to access the national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and local mental health providers. The Confess Project hosts voluntary virtual calls twice a month for trainees to receive further support and connect with other trainees and mental health experts.

In what contexts is this practice implemented (e.g., schools, clinical)?

The Confess Project trains barbers and stylists on best practices for engagement with clients as a community based, early intervention resource. Trained individuals build on-going positive relationships and encourage dialogues about mental health and accessing care on a local and personal level. They create a safe space in their shops and encourage community members to feel comfortable talking about emotional distress they may be experiencing. By using active listening and validating language, trained barbers and stylists can offer support or provide information about community mental health resources.

What is the dosage of this practice (e.g., one-time training, six-week curriculum)?

The “Beyond the Barbershop” training course is a free, one-time course. Upon completion of the course, barbers and stylists may voluntarily attend biweekly virtual calls for additional support and to connect with other trainees and/or mental health experts.

How is the practice delivered (e.g., online, in-person)?

The Confess Project’s “Beyond the Barbershop” mental health advocacy training is offered online or in-person within the community setting (i.e., barbershops, salons, or related cosmetology schools and academies). In-person trainings have been offered in select cities within Georgia, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. There are plans to expand to other areas.

What infrastructure or readiness is needed to implement this practice (e.g., capacity for data analysis, individual full-time equivalent [FTE])?

To deliver the in-person trainings, a Confess Project trainer travels to the identified training location with training materials and other technological equipment to support in-person training. The “Beyond the Barbershop” training is not limited to barbers: stylists, assistants, and administrative staff may attend the training.

For which population(s) can this practice be implemented?

For which population(s) is this best or promising practice (BPP) intended? Has it been adapted for diverse groups? If so, which ones?

The Confess Project “Beyond the Barbershop” training was initially designed to equip Black male barbers to become community mental health liaisons. The Confess Project has expanded its training to barbers and stylists who serve Black men, boys, and their families. The Confess

Project anticipates the expansion of this community mental health literacy and advocacy training to other marginalized communities.

For which populations, if any, is this practice NOT a good fit?

The Confess Project's "Beyond the Barbershop" training is primarily designed to encourage dialogue and resource sharing about mental health among Black boys and adults in underserved communities. Expansion of this program to other marginalized communities will require appropriate tailoring to ensure cultural relevance and alignment.

Who can implement this practice?

What expertise is needed to implement the practice?

To implement this practice, barbers must be certified in the "Beyond the Barbershop" training to apply skills gained from the course. Through completion of the course, they gain skills and knowledge of community resources within their role as a trusted community gatekeeper.

What specific training or certification is required to implement the practice?

Completion of the "Beyond the Barbershop" training is required to implement this practice. After completion of training, participants may attend biweekly virtual calls for on-going support and to connect with mental health experts and other trainees.

What costs are associated with delivering this practice?

The Confess Project is a community organization funded by federal, private and public institutions and foundations.

What is the cost associated with becoming trained?

The "Beyond the Barbershop" online course is free. Individuals must create a profile on The Confess Project website to access the free, self-paced training. Communities interested in hosting an in-person training would contact The Confess Project.

What is the time commitment associated with completing training?

The time commitment for the "Beyond the Barbershop" online training depends on the individual's ability and availability to complete the self-paced curriculum.

Are there recognized providers of training in this practice?

The Confess Project's team of public health experts, therapists, and education professionals is recognized for curating training content that empowers Black men with knowledge about mental health, community resources, and other subjects pertinent to Black excellence.

Does the practice have an associated fidelity assessment?

There is no associated fidelity assessment for this practice.

***What resources or references are useful for understanding/implementing the practice?
Where should one go for more information?***

- [The Confess Project of America](#)
- [On Demand: Eliminating Mental Health Stigma for Boys and Men of Color | Mental Health Technology Transfer Center \(MHTTC\) Network \(mhttcnetwork.org\)](#)

References

- Confess Project of America. n.d. [The Confess Project of America Homepage](#)
- Gelzhiser, J. and Lewis, L. n.d. [Barbers as Mental Health, Suicide Prevention and Interpersonal Violence Gatekeepers in the Community.](#)
- Holohan. M. 2021. [How Barber Shops Around the Country are Helping to Reduce Mental Health Stigma.](#) Today News. MSNBC.
- Lin, L., et al. 2018. [Demographics of the US Psychology Workforce.](#) American Psychological Association.
- Mental Health First Aid. n.d. [Mental Health First Aid Training.](#)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (a). n.d. [Identity and Cultural Dimensions: Black/African American.](#)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (b). n.d. [Mental Health Education: Family-to-Family.](#)
- Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Southeast MHTTC). 2022. [On Demand: Eliminating Mental Health Stigma for Boys and Men of Color.](#)
- Ward, E., et al. 2013. [African American Men and Women's Attitude Toward Mental Illness, Perceptions of Stigma, and Preferred Coping Behaviors.](#)

This Fact Sheet was created by:

Hannah Araya, MPH, Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Southeast MHTTC)

For more information about this Fact Sheet, contact the [Southeast MHTTC](#). To locate your Regional MHTTC or National Focus Area MHTTC, please [click here](#).