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Peer Support, Community, and the Stigma of Aging

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Older adults may be one of our most vulnerable populations, but they are not immune to the harmful effects of mental health stigmatization. As a result of this stigmatization, seniors are less likely to seek services, especially in the African American communities. Left untreated, mental health issues, such as depression, may leave this vulnerable population with disability or impairment. Such ailments can then lead to diminished quality of life, higher rates of mortality, and worsened health outcomes. According to Conner Et al., 2010, “older adults have the highest rate of completed suicide, which is associated with high rates of depression.” (Conner Et al., 2010) This increased rate of suicide and depression is a cause for concern. However, through the use of peer support, this stigma can start to be worked through.

There are a multitude of ways that peer support can be beneficial to battling the stigma surrounding mental health issues, but three generalized methods will be discussed here. First, open, judgment-free conversation around the topic of mental health is supported through peer support. Having opportunities for this type of conversation discourages secrecy, which can add to the negativity of stigma. Second, peer support creates an environment of empowerment. As opposed to living in shame, peer support provides a space for individuals to be encouraged to feel empowered as their true selves. A third way that peer support works to fight the stigma around mental health is by providing education to the community. (NAMI, 2018) Such education is a benefit to breaking the stigma, as it teaches the community necessary and factual information regarding mental health. Peer support provides individuals of all ages support that is necessary in order for our communities to continue to grow and learn from one another.

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