The Power of Talking: Two Voices on BIPOC Mental Health

Silence and stigma kept them from seeking help. Conversation, support and a willingness to break generational patterns helped them move forward.

Editor's Note: The name of the interviewee in recovery has been changed to protect his privacy.

While we celebrate BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Mental Health Month in July, it's important to always remember that people living with mental health challenges face stigma every single day, year-round. Mental illness affects people of all races, ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, many people in BIPOC communities face additional challenges, including barriers to accessing mental health care and stigma within their own cultures.

In this article, we hear from two representatives from BIPOC communities: Parantap Pandya, MA, Family Crises Coordinator & Community Educator for MHANJ in Union County's Intensive Family Support Services; and Carlos, a person who is in recovery from mental health conditions.

When Silence Becomes the Norm

Growing up, both men learned the same lesson in different ways: keep your struggles to yourself.

Parantap explained that in the South Asian culture, traditionally, men, especially, are expected to maintain the persona that they are "in charge" and everything is fine. "Many tend to downplay mental health issues because they want to appear to be competent, in control and to show the world that they are doing fine," he said. He shared that mental health challenges are often viewed as a shameful reflection of the entire family. "If one member of a family has a mental health issue, the family is viewed as having problems. Traditionally, men deny, avoid and don't admit to having mental health issues because of this stigma."

Parantap mentioned that this often leads to a lack of any recognition of feelings, stating, "There is a lot of denial when it comes to emotions and mental health issues."

Carlos described a similar sense in the Latino community. He observed that, "Traditionally, many Spanish people don't seem to recognize mental health as a health issue, and people don't often deal with it." If something doesn't seem "right," it isn't discussed.

After becoming a father, he recognized how damaging that silence could be.

He shared, "When I had my own kids, I realized that if I didn't break those generational traumas, they would continue."

Carrying the Weight Alone

The obligation to always appear to be fine often takes a toll.

Carlos recalled feeling trapped by problems he didn't know how to solve. "I felt stuck," he said. "I didn't have the tools to cope with a lot of challenges I had in life. I realized that without proper help, I wasn't going to get very far."

Parantap commented, "Many men feel overly responsible. They may think they have failed their families and carry guilt and shame. That burden can prevent men from reaching out because it feels like admitting failure when they need support the most; but emphasize the point that seeking help doesn't make you inferior."

The Courage to Ask for Help

For most of his life, Carlos continued to manage his emotional challenges by himself. With encouragement from Parantap and others who cared, he started to realize that healing could begin with a simple but difficult step.

"I just realized I couldn't do it by myself anymore," Carlos said. "I decided to accept professional help for the first time. I needed someone to help me make sense of what I was thinking." Eventually, he spoke the words that changed everything. "I finally said, 'I need to talk to somebody.'"

During that first conversation, years of emotions poured out. "That first day, I talked… a lot, and it helped a lot," he said.

As a mental health professional, Parantap believes that a moment of extreme vulnerability can become a turning point. "People conclude that it's time to change course and try something new and different," he said. "Growth doesn't happen by pretending everything is fine. It comes from learning through life's challenges. No one has to face those challenges alone. Just like we may have a team to help us with our physical health, we can have a team of people who support us through difficult mental health issues."

Redefining Strength

Looking back, both men highlighted an important first step: the importance of talking and expressing the need for help.

"For me to finally seek out help, I had to fall apart first," Carlos said. "Don't wait until then. It often seems like everything is taboo. Many of us find it hard to talk about mental health, but talking about it really does help."

Parantap agrees and encourages others to show themselves the same compassion they often extend to everyone else. He added, "Seeking help doesn't diminish your masculinity. It simply makes you human. Be kind to yourself and give yourself some grace."

Many people don't avoid asking for help because they're weak. Parantap relays, "For some people, asking for help means letting out a family secret – the masks comes off and men anticipate that society will look down on them. Being stuck and being afraid to ask for help is what many people learn from their environment. After opening up, men have shared that people were nice and supportive."

A Different Future

Despite the challenges, both men are optimistic about what's ahead.

Carlos proudly proclaims his motivation, "My kids," he said. "I've made sure they know they can talk to me. I tell them, 'I'm going to listen to what you have to say, and I'm going to work through it with you." Reflecting on his own childhood, he recognizes that many people around him were struggling in silence. "People close to me had been hurting. We just didn't know how to talk," he said. Today, he wants the next generation to choose a different path.

Parantap sees encouraging signs of change. "I have observed many people in the younger generation being much more open to talking and seeking help," he said. "As more people share their experiences, barriers begin to fall. We all become healthier by learning from one another."

Parantap and Carlos's reflections are reminders that healing often begins with a conversation. By being open, today's fathers, sons, brothers, and friends are helping build communities where asking for help is no longer seen as weakness, but as one of the strongest steps a person can take.