



Seattle's first Black Mental Health Fair

Posted by [Staff](#) / 04 - Jan - 2019

Laughter, song, and celebration may not be what you expect at a mental health fair, but it's exactly what the Institute for African Centered Thought (I-ACT) and Africatown Center for Education and Innovation (ACEI) had in mind when they organized Seattle's first Black Mental Health Fair.

They recognized that in the face of gentrification and displacement, the African American/African diaspora community was in need of a welcoming and supportive space for connection and healing.

The black community used to be more connected, we used to be whole. But now were very isolated and have less people to lean on, says Dr. Orisade Awodola, founder of I-ACT. We are at a point in time where addressing mental health is crucial for people of color, especially for black people.

As part of the Replanting Roots, Rebuilding Community (RRRC) partnership supported by Communities of Opportunity to restore community connections and rebuild a sense of place for Seattle's historic African American/African community, I-ACT and ACEI brought community members together for a Black Mental Health Fair to learn more about mental health and connect with one another.

Centering community strengths to heal

To combat the increasing community isolation brought on by displacement, I-ACT and ACEI wanted to create a mental health fair where community members could bring their whole selves and talk about mental health in a culturally relevant way.

The mental health fair opened with community members joining in song, dance, and pouring of libations to recognize ancestors and celebrate community resilience. Dr. Awodola then kicked off the day's discussion by encouraging community to think about mental health beyond clinical diagnoses. "Part of mental health is community support and pride in who you are and how you present yourself to the world," she shared.

Dr. Joye Hardiman discussed how gentrification is causing communities to lose their culture and become strangers. She invited people to embrace community connection as the foundation of good mental health and well-being. Community members also had the opportunity to connect with local vendors and resources including grief support, affordable housing opportunities, and more.

The day's events continued with Dr. Marcia Arunga, founder of RRRC's partner

Cultural Reconnection, sharing how recognizing our identities and cultural connections as strengths is a part of healing. She shared her work reconnecting African American women to their African roots and encouraged everyone to learn from one another. The healing work begins with every mind and heart reaching inside and asking, who am I and what do I know that I can share with somebody else?" she said. "That's really what today is all about.

Rebuilding a culture of connection and support

This Black Mental Health Fair is just the beginning of a series of forums and discussions I-ACT and ACEI plan to have around mental health. As they continue to organize community and create spaces for education and celebration, the RRRC partnership hopes to combat stigma around mental health and build a culture of open support and connection for future generations.

We must ground our children and our community in what really matters, said Marcia Arunga. And that is, that we can look in the eyes of each other and find answers, love, comfort, and support to move forward."