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CHRISTINA BRADLEY '12: Mental Health in a Time of Pandemic

As manager of support programs for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) New York City chapter, Christina Bradley has seen firsthand the overall decline in mental wellness since COVID-19 swept the United States. Not only is anxiety a symptom associated with COVID, she points out, “but simply watching the news and seeing that things aren’t getting better as quickly as we hoped for—along with the isolation and economic hardship—is creating a lot of confusion and stress.” “Access to mental health treatment is harder,” she says. “People have lost jobs and health insurance, and some people have moved back in with families that don’t understand their mental illness and may not be supporting them in the way they need.”

NAMI, a nonprofit, peer-based organization, utilizes trained volunteers who either live with mental illness or

have loved ones with mental illness to aid those seeking help. The NYC chapter serves 20,000 people a year and has more than 40 support group sessions a month.

“The idea behind NAMI is that if you are seeking support from people in a similar position to yours, it removes some of that power differential and mitigates the stigma of seeking help,” says Bradley, who majored in psychology at Haverford, then earned a Master of Health Sciences from Johns Hopkins University. She previously managed the crisis center network at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and spent two years researching population health at New York University’s School of Medicine, focusing on Black communities.

The Denver native is candid about successfully managing her own depression, as well as growing up in a family with mental health issues. Her career continues to

be inspired by Professor Emeritus Kaye Edwards, whose “Violence and Public Health” class inspired Bradley to imagine a better mental health system. “[Public health] is such an important and powerful field,” Bradley says. “We can put resources and systems in place before people get to those acute problems. Nobody is left out of the public health lens.”

Have you always been interested in mental health?

I started out trying to understand my family. I saw things as a child and knew that something wasn't quite right, but I didn't know what it was. [There was alcoholism on both sides of her family, along with schizophrenia and substance abuse.] There was a lot of pain and healing that needed to happen, and I don't think anyone in my family knew where to begin. They didn't have the language—the generation before mine didn't have the information we have now. We're still a family full of love, but there are things everyone would have done differently if we'd had better information.

How does your own experience with depression help you better understand those going through similar issues?

I work from a place of hope because I know that recovery is possible with the right support. I also have a lens of understanding, and I'm candid about how difficult it is. The mental health system is severely fractured and in need of more investment—I don't sugarcoat that. It's difficult to navigate, but we can make it work for us. We have to because we are worth it. That's what I keep as my north star in my work.

Tell us about the Black Minds Matter group that you recently started at NAMI.

It's designed to be a support group for people who identify as Black and are

living with mental illness. I conceived the idea years ago when I was looking for support. Black psychologists and psychiatrists were hard to come by. Some support groups were great, but none were tailored to serving and supporting Black people. As summer progressed and Black Lives Matter protests picked up, having this group was incredibly timely. It's become one of our most popular groups. I'm really heartened by the fact that people are enjoying it and learning from each other.

You've also been involved in helping to create more support mechanisms for alumni and students at Haverford.

Yes. I cofounded the Multicultural Alumni Action Group (MAAG) in 2015, an affinity group designed to connect students and alums of color and foster inclusivity within the Haverford community. As alums of color, we felt that an affinity group dedicated to amplifying diverse voices and operationalizing mentorship was long overdue. We wanted students to feel more supported facing challenges within and beyond the Haverbubble.

Has Black mental health been neglected?

I think mental health has been neglected in general and like many things in our lives, Black people suffer disproportionately. We tend to go undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, undertreated, or not treated at all. We have a difficult relationship with medical professionals, having historically been taken advantage of or abused. There's the issue of bias and not enough representation in the medical field and certainly in the mental health field. And in our own community, there are myths around mental health, a lack of information, self-stigma, and the age-old trope of “pray it away.” This is why spaces like the Black Minds Matter support group are so important. The group

provides a place to acknowledge these barriers and do the continuous work of healing from them. We can talk openly about discrimination, our struggles with mental illness, challenging familial relationships, the connection between physical and mental health, and how to take care of ourselves in a world that hates black skin. It means so much to be able to discuss these issues without fearing judgment or backlash. It is a space for us, by us, and I am dedicated to creating more.

What are some coping mechanisms you are recommending during the COVID crisis?

Showing up to a support group is one easy step to take. At NAMI, everything we offer is free, and support groups are open. When you show up to a group, all of a sudden you go from being in an apartment all day by yourself, or with the same two people, and your world is expanded. It goes a long way to see other people and hear that they, too, are having a hard time. It's important to get perspective on your experience by talking and hearing from other people.

You also gain from supporting other people. Listening and offering support feels empowering and gives people a sense of being a part of a community, and a sense of purpose and value.

Staying in touch with your psychiatrist or mental health provider and keeping them updated is another important piece. You have to approach this from multiple angles. And finally, there's the notion of self-care. We talk about what's worked in the past to help us feel better, and what we've discovered anew in this time. For a lot of people that's exercise, eating healthily, drinking a lot of water, and getting fresh air.

For information on the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City, go to: naminyc.org.

—Anne Stein