May is Mental Health Awareness Month and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month. May also traditionally marks the height of spring: May flowers, warmer temperatures, a time of rebirth. As far as mental health, our own Shira Collings wrote the piece below that beautifully expresses how NEC wants to approach this month and every month.

“May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and we’d like to change the conversation. Too often, the conversation that occurs during this month focuses on diagnosing people with mental illness and attributing their symptoms to a biochemical brain disease. Social and environmental factors are often not recognized as contributors to emotional distress and crisis. Here at the National Empowerment Center (NEC), we want to shift the conversation to acknowledge the role that environmental factors including trauma and oppression including structural racism, misogyny, cissexism, and sizeism play in our mental health. To us, Mental Health Awareness Month means raising awareness of the ways that our psychological well-being is not merely an individual issue; it is intricately linked to the health and well-being of our society and communities.

(Continued on last page)
LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT: BRYAN BALL CARVAJAL
by Kimberly D. Ewing, eCPR Coordinator/Lead Trainer

Burnout at Work: The Importance of Cultivating Workplace Connection

Check out Kim’s interview with Bryan Ball Carvajal from United Way of Central Indiana on the importance of cultivating workplace connection in helping to prevent burnout at work.

"I celebrate and affirm myself by being authentic and walking in my truth. I have spent many years in hiding because I felt that I did not fit in anywhere. I also celebrate and affirm myself, [but] understanding that I’m still a work in progress and have many more milestones to face. I understand that I am the creator of my own reality and it’s not my responsibility to create someone else’s happiness. After going through experiences of losing both parents at an early age, experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, financial instability, mistreatment early in my professional life, and church-hurt due to my sexual orientation, it drives me to have the courage to lean into my vulnerability."

-A glimpse from Bryan

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS AT KIM’S COFFEE HOUSE

In this 3-part conversation, Kim, Joana, and Juan share their responses to the question “What Does Mental Health Mean to You and Your Community?”

Click on links below to view

PART I - Black Community
PART II - AAPI Community
PART III - Latino Community

HIGHLIGHTED RESOURCES

- eCPR Helped Me Avoid Burnout in the Workplace (with Rebekah Bagley, Mental Health America of Central Carolinas)
- Addressing Burnout in the Behavioral Health Workforce Through Organizational Strategies (SAMHSA Evidence-Based Resource guide)
- Mental Health Awareness Month Toolkit (SAMHSA Resources)
WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN TO THE AAPI COMMUNITY?
by Joana Arcangel, Consultant

We must first recognize the diversity of groups within the AAPI community. As much as we are different, we also have a lot of similarities. I believe both our differences and what we have in common help strengthen resiliency and connection within the AAPI community and beyond.

The concepts of diversity, equity, inclusion, and collaboration are talked about more often now. It is empowering and restorative to know about opportunities opening up that uplift diverse voices, and efforts being made to address systemic inequities.

Earlier this year, I attended a webinar called Equity-Grounded Leadership (EGL) Fellow Program: A Co-Produced Approach to Behavioral Health System Transformation. It was put on by the College for Behavioral Health Leadership, and featured members from the first cohort of this fellowship.

Click here to view the Equity Grounded Leadership Fellow Program flyer

The EGL Fellow Program is an immersive 11-month hybrid program for current or emerging leaders with learned and lived experience who have a deep desire to effect change in their organizations, communities, or regions. The EGL Fellow Program shifts the focus of cross-sector behavioral health leaders to intersectionality, equity, and antiracism for behavioral health systems transformation.

Call for applications are open - apply by June 12, 2023

With this beautiful celebration of diversity in mind, peer support in practice, and the desire to uplift community voices, I connected with a few AAPI leaders whose insight and work have greatly impacted their communities and society at large. I could not imagine a better way to respond to this question about what mental health means to the AAPI community than to share this platform with them. Before we dive in for a glimpse of their stories on the next few pages, I’ll begin by sharing a bit about my journey.

Click here to view the recording and PowerPoint presentation

Hearing from these leaders inspired me to deeply reflect about how I can be more intentional through my role as a consultant working with the NEC. I am fortunate to work alongside colleagues at NEC who are actively taking steps towards this collective vision of transformation and healing with community.
WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN TO THE AAPI COMMUNITY?

I came to the United States from the Philippines at the age of eight. Coming to the U.S. from poverty and many forms of abuse, I don’t know if I ever had the typical "American Dream." For most of my life, survival mode had been the only way of being, and one day escaping that—before I even knew what was beyond it—was the dream.

Values that I often see prioritized within the Filipino community include education, careers, blood family, religion, barkada (friends or those you hang with), reputation/social status, and wealth. These words seem straightforward, but the experiences behind them can be so much more nuanced.

"There is so much beauty, creativity, and strength within the Filipino culture. It is a huge part of who I am, and part of my recovery includes learning about the history of my heritage, navigating my personal experiences in the Filipino community, and holding space for these complexities.

In my first language, Tagalog, there’s something we call utang na loob, which literally means “debt of one’s inner self.” Utang na loob is about a debt of gratitude—somehow paying back good deeds, help, care or support that one has received. Depending on the circumstances, it can be a beautiful gift of humility and interconnectedness, but it also can affect mental health negatively and even be exploitative at times when it neglects context, communication, boundaries, and personhood.

Growing up, I learned a lot of English by reading books from the local library, and watching television shows like The Simpsons, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, 7th Heaven, and Sister, Sister. I first heard the word "hope" from reading a poem by Emily Dickinson. I hung onto every word. I had to. And I’m glad I did.

In Tagalog, hope is pag-asa. And asahan or umasa means to count on, rely, have faith.
WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN TO THE AAPI COMMUNITY?

(Continued from page 4)

On this page, we hear from advocate and writer Vera R. Calloway. Her path to healing led her to becoming a Peer Support Specialist and Health Navigator in Los Angeles County where she has supported and empowered adults living with substance use disorder and mental health challenges over the past 12 years.

"As an Afro-Japanese child of 1970s California, I’ve long understood my identity as that of being both African American and Japanese—not one or the other. I don’t know how not to be both, so I stopped wondering long ago whether I’m black enough or Japanese enough.

Growing up in a predominately white town, my personal opinion had no influence on how others perceived me in racialized terms. Being defined by others—especially my white friends and neighbors back then—meant I would always be othered. The question was never whether I was Black enough nor Japanese enough—it was about whether I fit in with my classmates and neighbors in my white town.

"Support for behavioral health and wellness in AAPI communities during the past few years and the increase in Asian mental health discussions on social media bodes well for the overall climate of acceptance for those facing mental health challenges. I rejoice in the fact that the Asian and Pacific Islander communities are considerably more aware of reducing stigma and supporting mental health treatment.

With open racism and anti-Asian hate crimes that surfaced with COVID-19, the greater Asian American and immigrant communities have embraced mental health treatment and support in times of fear and distress.

I feel a growing sense of alarm mixed with anger and the unrelenting compulsion to resist no matter what. Having spent time years ago with the late Japanese American human rights activist, Yuri Kochiyama, and other outspoken activists, all I know is the day may soon come when mental health advocates of all races will decide whether to become more vocal in our activism and otherwise resist the encroachment to our freedom of mind and treatment."
WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN TO THE AAPI COMMUNITY?
(Continued from page 5)

Another AAPI advocate and leader, Nolan Ross Samé-Weil, current Director of Development at the Los Angeles Centers for Alcohol and Drug Abuse (L.A. CADA), writes:

"The significance of mental health as a vital component of overall well-being cannot be understated. As Mental Health Month and Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage (AAPI) Month are celebrated, it is essential to recognize and address the unique mental health needs of this diverse population, to which I proudly belong.

In the AAPI community, mental health is frequently stigmatized, with cultural factors such as the model minority myth and the emphasis on preserving familial harmony impeding open dialogue and help-seeking behaviors. Consequently, many individuals may not receive the care they require, resulting in worsening mental health issues and insufficient resources tailored to the distinct needs of the AAPI community.

"My experiences have taught me the importance of creating safe spaces for AAPI individuals to discuss their struggles and access the support they need."

My personal experience with generational trauma is a testament to the impact of these cultural belief systems, which have been ingrained in my parents and passed down to me. Growing up, I grappled with immense shame and anxiety for various reasons, including my identification as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. As I matured, the pain became unbearable, and without any coping mechanisms taught by my parents, I sought comfort in alcohol and substances. Years of struggle eventually led me to the realization that I no longer wished to live this way, prompting me to seek help and access life-saving treatment for my substance use disorders.

Nolan Ross Samé-Weil, MBA-HCM, CADC II, ICADC

Say more about your role at Los Angeles Centers for Alcohol and Drug Abuse (L.A. CADA) and how you hope to improve mental health within the AAPI community.

Through my personal and professional journey, I have become an advocate for mental health and addiction treatment. My experiences have taught me the importance of creating safe spaces for AAPI individuals to discuss their struggles and access the support they need. By actively engaging with local organizations, schools, and businesses, I hope to increase awareness and develop resources that address the unique mental health challenges faced by the AAPI community. Through continued education, advocacy, and collaboration, we can work together to dismantle the barriers that prevent our community from achieving optimal mental health and well-being."

Click here for video about L.A. CADA
WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN TO THE AAPI COMMUNITY?
(Continued from page 6)

We also highlight Oanh "Kim" Vuong who shares to open up conversations about the intersection between mental health, AAPI community, and disability rights. Kim writes:

"Some Asian communities have too much stigma about people with disabilities. They don't want to talk about disabilities or get help for it. Some people think that we are a curse by God just because we have some kind of disability. There has to be more education between people with disabilities and AAPI communities about breaking the stigma that people with disabilities are not human beings. That we can't do anything on own. Well, I am a good example: my families think that I can't do anything. I believe [the] intersection with disabilities and mental health [matter] because [people] may not know how to deal with it. I know that my advocacy about disability rights and mental health will help not only [me] but others."

Oanh "Kim" Vuong was born in Vietnam in 1974 and came to the U.S. in 1980. Since childhood, she has lived with cerebral palsy, a condition that has made it a challenge to do many things that other people take for granted, from walking on the beach to speaking to a group. Nevertheless, she earned a degree in women's studies from Santa Ana College and embarked on a career helping other people with disabilities lead fuller lives.

For the past nine years, she’s worked at the Tichenor Clinic in Long Beach, where she is the co-developer of life skills classes for teenagers with disabilities. She also currently works as an Accessibility Advocate in the Department of Public Health for the City of Long Beach.

Kim is also a member of the city of Long Beach’s Citizens’ Advisory Commission on Disabilities, where she has advocated for installing beach mats to enable disabled residents to use the city’s beaches.

Kim is a 2021 recipient of the Disabled Resources Center’s Jerry Stein Memorial Independent Living Award, which recognizes volunteer and professional achievement and promotes awareness of the achievements of people with disabilities.
A YOUTH PEER'S REFLECTIONS ON MOTHER'S DAY
by Shira Collings, Youth Coordinator

While Mother’s Day is an important holiday and a joyous occasion for many people, it can also be a difficult time of year for some young people, in particular those with histories of traumas and mental health challenges. Many young people who have experienced trauma growing up have complex relationships with their families of origin that may include estrangement, disconnection, or lack of acceptance/affirmation. Some youth have also experienced the loss of a parent or have experiences of foster care or family separation.

In addition to complex relationships with one’s parents, many young people struggle with complex relationships to becoming parents themselves. Though one in five people are affected by infertility, and at least one in ten women experience miscarriage, these topics are rarely discussed and often considered taboo in our culture. This can be a major source of trauma for young adults and who want to become parents. Additionally, many young adults who have chosen to be childfree face shaming, stigma, and stereotypes.

For these young people, Mother’s Day can bring up feelings of grief, loss, and shame. This time of year can exacerbate anxiety, depression, extreme states, suicidal thoughts, and other mental health concerns. All too often, those who are struggling on Mother’s Day are overlooked and not given support.

As peers, it is important for us to recognize how difficult this holiday can be for youth, and to make efforts to provide trauma-informed support to those who are in emotional distress during this time.

For many young people, a crucial part of healing from trauma around relationships to parents and parenthood is developing the ability to create and define their own families outside of this. It is common for LGBTQ+ youth to create and nurture chosen family relationships as a source of support. Young people may choose to define family as including friends, roommates, significant others, pets, and more. The philosophy and principles of peer support, including approaches like eCPR, can be instrumental in fostering healing relationships and belonging among friends, colleagues, and community members, which can provide some of the support that one’s family of origin is unable to provide.

This Mother’s Day, I hope that in addition to celebrating mothers, we can celebrate the strength and resilience of youth who have faced trauma in their relationships with their parents and/or parenthood. And I hope we can celebrate the value of peer support in building and sustaining a sense of belonging and acceptance in families of all kinds.

RELATED RESOURCES

- **Together Estranged** (provides support to those who are estranged from family due to childhood trauma, abuse, lack of acceptance for being LGBTQ+, and more)
- **Postpartum International** (has support groups for pregnancy loss and infertility)
- **The NotMom** (an online community for women without children)
- **Children’s Bereavement Center** (has free support groups for youth who have experienced loss)
UPCOMING WEBINAR

COMPASSIONATE APPROACHES TO CRISIS WEBINAR SERIES

Increasing Occupational Resiliency for Peer-Run Respite Staff & Volunteers
Tuesday, May 30, 2023, 2–3:30 p.m. ET / 11:00 a.m.–12:30 p.m. PT

Follow this link for Time Zone Converter: www.thetimezoneconverter.com

Peer-run respites offer unique and invaluable types of support and resources to people experiencing mental health crises. Staff and volunteers in this setting must have a set of duties and skills that allow them to cultivate a recovery-oriented and holistic environment. These efforts require a great deal of intentionality and energy to sustain. In this webinar, the presenters seek to connect with others who may benefit from learning about occupational resiliency within these crisis alternative settings.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Participants will learn about sustaining hope and co-creating healing communities. Hear from personal and professional experiences of the presenters through their diverse roles: former guest, volunteer, peer support staff, and management.

2. Participants will be able to acknowledge potential challenges that may arise in this setting and recognize signs of burnout for staff.

3. Participants will identify key elements that can be used to sustain one’s well-being while providing support at a peer-run respite: including spirituality, team synergy, setting boundaries, and accountability from leadership.

HIGHLIGHTED RESOURCES

- **Workplace Mental Health - Resilience: A Strong Workforce Needs It**
  (Article from Center for Workplace Mental Health)

- **How to Measure Resilience with These 8 Scales + PDF**
  (Article that includes why organizations should pay attention to resilience & access to free PDF with 3 resilience exercises)
A TIME OF REBIRTH
(Continued from front page)

As part of Mental Health Awareness Month, we want to raise awareness of the multitude of peer led programs and services available that highlight the role of environmental factors in our mental health and support people in feeling heard and accepted rather than diagnosed and “fixed.” Peer led services including the Hearing Voices Network, peer respites, and warmlines, as well as educational programs like Emotional CPR, focus on providing a safe space for people to share their stories and know that they are not alone. These programs promote connection and community as a way to heal from crisis rather than biomedical treatment.

We also want to highlight paradigms that honor the diversity of our cognitive and emotional styles without pathologizing difference as illness or abnormality. Neurodiversity and Mad Pride are two paradigms that view psychiatric, emotional, and neurological disabilities as a naturally occurring form of human diversity that can be viewed as a positive source of identity rather than abnormalities that need to be treated or cured. They promote acceptance and accommodation rather than cure.

At NEC, we believe that the issue of mental health is complex, and the narrative that emotional distress is solely or primarily the result of a biological brain disease is oversimplistic. We want to recognize the multitude of programs, services, and activist initiatives that are challenging this narrative and adding nuance to an important conversation. We believe that this contributes to the healing, dignity, and recovery of those of us who have been through emotional distress and crisis.”

Maybe Shira’s message is new to you, and hopefully this has created an opening for you to look at mental health a bit differently. Or perhaps Shira’s message is familiar but rekindles a spark in you. Spring is prime time for rejuvenation and a renewed sense of inspiration and hope that we can make a difference.

As this newsletter highlights the AAPI community, NEC is not only changing the conversation, but is committed to continuing to take action by intentionally shifting to uplift our diverse communities. It is my intention to continue to spread the message of hope, healing, and community within my work through NEC and beyond. If any of what this issue included resonated with you, we welcome you to reach out to us and share.