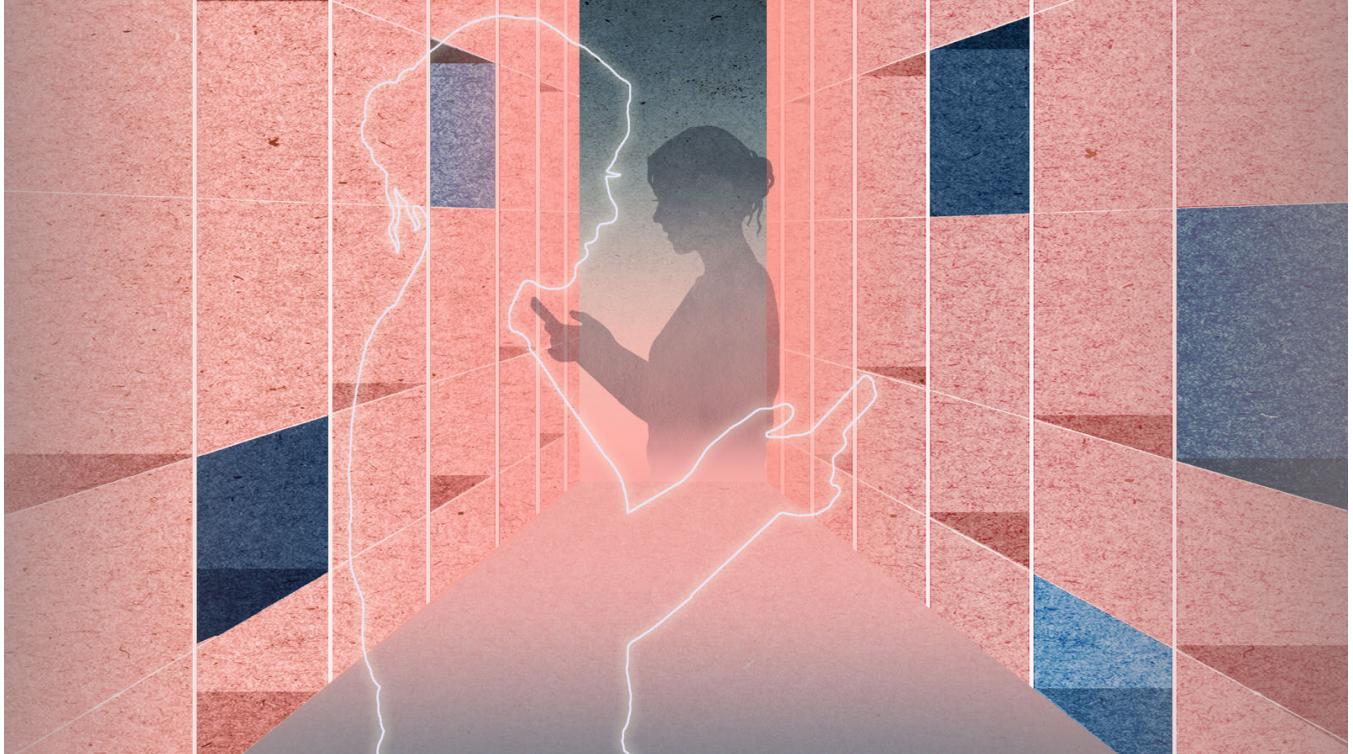




Shades of Mental Health



People of color create their own mental health services online

Faced with a pandemic and racial violence, people of color have created apps and organizations to support marginalized communities.

By Kristen Rogers, CNN

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When people of color have found themselves marginalized and shunned from mainstream spaces, they've historically built rooms for themselves.

That initiative and resistance is what some people of color — Black, Latinx, Asian

American and Native American — have taken up by creating digital spaces and organizations for the mental health needs of their communities.

In a world where the mental health workforce is predominantly White — especially in countries where White people are the majority — people of color's access to mental health services can be hindered by socioeconomic, stigma or language or cultural barriers.

"There's a long history of building out ecosystems of care in our communities," said Erica Woodland, the founder and executive director of the [National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network](#).

That makes sense: Racial and ethnic minorities, [studies](#) have shown, respond well to mental health professionals who are culturally relevant and understanding of their experiences.

There are numerous people of color who have centered their lives' missions around the mental wellness of people of color — and especially during racial incidents and protests and the pandemic, which has [disproportionately impacted people of color](#).

Here are some of the mental health platforms, apps and organizations people of color have created to support the well-being of their communities.

Checking in while staying in

As someone raised by parents who immigrated from China and Taiwan to the United States and experienced intergenerational trauma, Carrie Zhang, founder of the [Asian Mental Health Project](#), knows all too well the mental health stigma Asian Americans face.

"There's a lot of pressure to perform very well," she said. "A lot of that is due to the

pressures of coming from immigrant families, the whole model minority myth — stuff like that that we're really attuned to in these communities."



Carrie Zhang, founder, Asian Mental Health Project

As a kid, Zhang experienced anxiety and depression, but stigma left her incapable of describing her feelings to her parents.

Frustrated that her high school's insufficient mental health services didn't improve after she went to college, Zhang used her background in public relations to develop online resources for other Asian Americans. "I think I had a knack for synthesizing information and making things more accessible," Zhang said.

She interviewed about 50 people to find the common themes of stress and mental health barriers among Asian Americans — which included high-pressure households and self-loathing.

Launched in February 2019, the AMHP offers online community events,

newsletters and other resources supported by Asian American therapists.

Zhang's current venture — [Stay in, Check-in](#) — hosts Instagram Live sessions with therapists who equip Asian Americans with the tools to cope with stress, linguistic and solution-focused strategies for talking with Asian American families about mental health, and advice for dealing with anti-Asian racism during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Cheryl Tien, a Chinese-Vietnamese American doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of San Francisco, had been feeling ineffective because she had less work during the pandemic when she stumbled across AMHP's check-ins.

"It was just really nice to connect with other Asian-identifying people," she said. "My partner is White. While we are able to talk about how Covid had impacted us individually, there was an increase in physical attacks against Asian people, and I was just dealing with issues like being worried about my family."

The check-ins were a “space where I could connect with people who had similar concerns,” Tien, who now facilitates some of the check-ins, said.

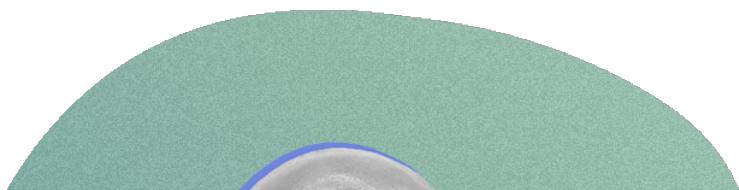
Meditation by people of color, for people of color

Armed with the understanding that culturally relevant practices are essential for healing, [Liberate](#) is a subscription-based meditation app that includes practices and talks for communities of color.

Powered by over 40 teachers of color with a diverse background in lineage, perspective and approach, Liberate’s content is tailored so that everyone can find a practice they connect with.

The app comes with over 240 meditations and talks designed by people of color in consideration of common experiences of the same group. Subscribers can practice, build a practice with a teacher and communicate with one another.

Amid a strong bout of stress, anxiety and depression, Los Angeles-based Liberate founder and CEO Julio Rivera created the app after a transformation in self-compassion spurred by meditating in different digital and physical spaces for people of color.





Julio Rivera, founder and CEO, Liberate

"I found a lot of healing in that space and working through my own challenges with my relationship to myself and how I constantly burn myself out," Rivera said. Society sends messages to people of color "that we have to be different to succeed (and) assimilate into a system that's not set up for our success."

To address a lack of meditation resources that centered Black and brown voices, Rivera said, he used his software engineering and mobile development background to launch Liberate in February 2019. The quiet launch to 20 people morphed into over 50,000 people now using the app to reduce anxiety, sleep better, stress less, heal from racial trauma, cope with microaggressions and more.

Advancing healing for queer and trans people of color

Belonging to a racial or ethnic minority can come with additional challenges if a person also identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or another gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation that doesn't fit the norm.

Queer and transgender communities of color “are experiencing high levels of violence, criminalization and surveillance, and (they) are also experiencing a ton of discrimination and also abuse when trying to connect with any kind of health care setting,” Woodland said.

It wasn’t until [1974](#) that “homosexuality” was no longer listed as a category of disorder and replaced with the category “sexual orientation disturbance” in the American Psychiatric Association’s [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#), the handbook used by health care professionals as the authoritative guide to diagnosing mental disorders.

“Ego-dystonic homosexuality” — when a person’s sexual orientation is incongruous with his ideal self and therefore anxiety-inducing — replaced sexual orientation disturbance in 1980. That diagnosis was replaced with “sexual disorder not otherwise specified” in 1987, which can include “persistent and marked distress about one’s sexual orientation.”

“Right now, for trans folks and nonbinary folks, for gender-affirming care they have to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria,” Woodland said, referring to the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

“You have to claim that you are unwell to live your authentic and best life. The field in and of itself is just inherently rooted in queer(phobia) and transphobia, White supremacy and ableism. You can’t superficially make your services more accessible without dealing with the history.”

Based in Oakland, California, Woodland works as a clinical social worker,

psychotherapist, clinical supervisor and healing justice practitioner with youth, people of color and LGBTQ people.

“Our goal is to really integrate a framework of healing justice into movements for social justice and also into the field of mental health,” he said.



Erica Woodland, founder and executive director, National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network

Woodland founded the [National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network](#) in May 2016 to support queer and trans therapists of color experiencing the same struggles as their clients, and eventually link queer and trans people of color with therapists.

For some queer and trans people of color, the pandemic has meant being unable to afford therapy or having to shelter in place with people who aren't accepting or affirming of their gender or sexual orientation, he said. And that lack of acceptance is sometimes expressed through violence.

The network's mental health fund supports a portion of patients' therapy.

Providing the lowdown on prospective workplaces

Netta Jenkins and Jacinta Mathis, two Black women, were coworkers at a tech company in New York City when they received questions from other people of color about the racial diversity and acceptance in places they had worked.

The people asked how diverse the staff was, what the company culture was like in terms of ideology and personality in regard to race, and how growth opportunities were earned and distributed.

Realizing that there didn't exist a space for people of color to seek advice from fellow professionals of color, in July 2019 Jenkins and Mathis launched [Dipper](#) — a platform for professionals of color to anonymously or identifiably assess a prospective workplace before threatening their mental health and success in a potentially racist, prejudiced or discriminatory work culture.





Netta Jenkins and Jacinta Mathis, cofounders, Dipper

We “really (look) at Dipper as a safe space for people of color where they can connect anywhere to talk about anything that they’re dealing with in the workplace and then look for solutions,” she added. “We also want to be a place where companies can find resources to create a more inclusive environment as well.”

Dipper gives them a space to discuss the stress of watching growth opportunities go to predominantly White people, experiencing microaggressions that are linked to mental health disorders and suicide, and being left out of meetings and work gatherings.

“Saving lives” is part of Dipper, Jenkins said, “because when we think about some of the things that professionals of color face within the workplace, and even when we read articles of how microaggressions are linked to suicide, it’s almost a matter of life and death.”

For over 8,000 members to have a resource that could potentially save them that stress “is a gem in itself,” she added. People can also ask about how to deal with applications or performance reviews and share about the pros and cons of their own companies.

“We also want to highlight the companies that people feel like are doing well,” Mathis said.

The Big Dipper and Little Dipper are the celestial inspirations for the community’s name, since they were “signs of liberation, direction and freedom” for ancestors and they connect experiences of people of color worldwide, Mathis said.

Dipper is about people of color seeing the opportunity, guidance and pathways possible for them, said Jenkins. “Access is our opportunity, only because of the

journey of those before us," reads Dipper's [vision statement](#).

During the pandemic and recent racial incidents, Jenkins and Mathis have heard from people who have been offended by lip service about valuing the Black Lives Matter movement that isn't "reflective of actionable steps that they're taking internally," Jenkins said.

For consultant Yash Kamaat, Dipper provides career insights meaningful for people of color that other, conventional career websites don't.

"Those combinations of experiences have been like a light in the night," said Kamaat, who is also cofounder of a real estate investment company and CEO of their own tech company (Kamaat uses they pronouns). "It's provided this way to be able to not only connect with other people of color, but also queer people of color and people of color who may have mental disruptions and disabilities."

Protecting Black minds

In the aftermath of the death of George Floyd in May, two women who formed a sisterhood while attending the University of the West of England Bristol took action.

Deeply troubled by the insufficient mental health services in the United Kingdom, the mental health disparities among Black people and another incident of racial violence, Agnes Mwakatuma, 26, and Annie Nash, 29, founded [Black Minds Matter UK](#) — a charitable fund designed to connect Black people and families with free, professional mental health resources and services. Included are up to 12 sessions of therapy (paid in full) with a certified, culturally competent Black therapist.





"Mental health has been something that has impacted my life greatly and that I feel passionately about," Nash, who is from Bristol and also a singer, said. "The Black Lives Matter movement is something we have been aligned with for a number of years so setting up Black Minds Matter UK alongside Agnes felt like a natural progression."

Set to launch in just over a month, the organization aims to normalize therapy within the Black community — in which intergenerational trauma, religion and stigma, in addition to socioeconomic factors, can be barriers to getting help for mental issues. The organization's waitlist is closed for 2020, and will reopen once registrants complete 12 sessions of therapy.

Black Minds Matter UK will also serve burgeoning Black therapists, who can also find support for and access to coaching, workshops and training.



Annie Nash and Agnes Mwakatuma, cofounders, Black Minds Matter UK

"It is important to highlight that Black people face various struggles from anxiety, depression to body dysmorphia outside of racial discrimination," Mwakatuma said via email. "That accompanied with the current pressures of (Covid-19) has resulted in more people seeking therapy as a way to cope in isolation."

Compounding the issue is the unavailability, expensiveness, delays and language and cultural barriers surrounding the local government mental health services — exacerbated by a reduction in investment in the National Health Service by the UK government, Mwakatuma said.

"Organisations like BMMUK should not exist, especially in the western world," Mwakatuma said via email. "We as civilians should not rely on crowdfunding for our human right to access appropriate and quality mental health treatments."

Although Mwakatuma and Nash have been successful during their first round of crowdfunding, they fear the fundraising strategy may be unsustainable as the number of people reaching out to them increases on a daily basis.

In the meantime, the women offer other resources such as healthy recipes and live talks about mental health and racial justice issues on [BMMUK's Instagram](#)

account. “It was important that we were giving the Black community a platform to heal, feel seen, valued and supported without exposing them to the level of trauma porn that we see on a daily basis,” Mwakatuma said.

“Our virtual community has found that many of our creative offerings have been useful and it has reminded them of how they can build positive coping mechanisms,” she added, via email. “We receive countless direct messages and engagement which makes us feel that we are taking positive steps towards addressing mental health in the Black community.”

Credits

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