

# Ageing and Mental Health in the Black Communities in the Diaspora

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# Introduction

## How Mental Health Affects Seniors

Mental health is a crucial component of overall well-being at any age. Its significance becomes even more pronounced in our senior years.

Mental health is just as crucial in later life as physical health, yet it often receives less attention—especially within marginalized communities like ours.

Often overlooked or misattributed to the natural aging process, mental health conditions can profoundly impact a senior's quality of life, physical health, and independence.

This presentation will explore the various social elements mental health effects on seniors, common conditions, contributing factors like migratory experiences, systemic discrimination, and varied cultural contexts, its impacts, and strategies for promotion and support.

I will not delve in the medical aspect as I am not a Medical Doctor

# The Saga of Bawo Emiko

As an African we like story telling. Our brains have been conditioned to learn and understand that way. So in that vein I will use the story of Bawo Emiko to illustrate the understanding of this topic.



Bawo left Nigeria in the early eighties. He graduated with an Engineering degree. He left as a young man full of dreams. Going abroad, working hard, make lots of money then returning home. Establish a Engineering firm with a lot of foreign expatriates and a connection to a pool of those expatriates.



But Reality got in the way of Bawo's dreams. He got a rude awakening when he stepped on the shores of Europe



45 years later he is living by himself, divorced, with little contact with his 4 children.




He is a very lonely man



## Factors affecting Common Mental Health Conditions in Seniors

While aging itself is not a cause of mental illness, seniors can experience a range of mental health conditions. The mental health experiences of older adults in the African diaspora are shaped by several overlapping and interacting factors: Some of the most prevalent include:







## 1. Migration and Acculturation Stress

(We can all relate to this -  
Classic Bawo Emiko experiences )

Bawo is not alone. For seniors who migrated to Western countries, adapting to a different culture, language, and lifestyle can be isolating. They may feel disconnected from both their home culture and the dominant culture around them, leading to a sense of rootlessness

For many older Africans and Black individuals in the diaspora, migration is a defining life event.

The migratory journey itself can be traumatic, involving displacement, loss of social networks, and exposure to violence.

Post-migration, acculturation stress arises from navigating new cultural norms, languages, and social systems.

Older migrants may experience profound feelings of loss related to their homeland, family, and community, leading to isolation, depression, and a sense of alienation.

They may face distinct forms of discrimination and xenophobia in their new countries, adding to their mental health burden. Issues of documentation, legal status, and fear of deportation can also be significant stressors.

## 2. Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Health Inequities

- ▶ Across the diaspora, Black communities frequently experience disproportionate socioeconomic disadvantage, including
- ▶ lower income levels,
- ▶ limited educational attainment, and
- ▶ reduced access to quality employment.

These factors lead to

- ▶ Poorer living conditions,
- ▶ chronic financial stress,
- ▶ and reduced access to health-promoting resources.

These cumulative disadvantages contribute to higher rates of chronic physical health conditions (e.g., hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease), which are inextricably linked to mental health outcomes, often exacerbating depression and cognitive decline in older age. The intersection of race and class creates a cycle of disadvantage that impacts mental well-being.







### 3. Cultural Interpretations of Mental Health and Stigma

Diverse cultural beliefs within the African diaspora significantly influence how mental illness is understood, expressed, and managed.

There can be a strong emphasis on resilience, spirituality, and community support.

While these are powerful protective factors, they can also contribute to a strong stigma around mental illness, leading to underreporting, reluctance to seek professional help, and a preference for traditional or faith-based healing practices over Western clinical interventions.

Mental health challenges may be somaticized (expressed as physical symptoms), attributed to spiritual causes, or seen as a sign of personal weakness, (especially amongst men) delaying diagnosis and appropriate treatment. The lack of culturally congruent care providers further complicates help-seeking.

# Its Not All Doom and Gloom



## **Resilience and Community Strengths**

- ▶ Despite these formidable challenges, older Africans and Black communities throughout the diaspora demonstrate remarkable resilience.
- ▶ Strengths-based approaches that leverage robust family ties, strong social networks, vibrant spiritual and religious institutions, and deep cultural heritage are crucial for promoting mental well-being.
- ▶ Faith-based organizations often play a pivotal role in emotional support. Churches, mosques, and temples can serve as informal mental health hubs.
- ▶ These community assets can serve as vital sources of support, coping mechanisms, and avenues for health promotion.

## **Family-Centered Culture**

- ▶ Despite physical distance, family loyalty and multigenerational care traditions often remain strong. Storytelling and oral history provide not just identity but emotional grounding.

## **Resilience Born of Adversity**

- ▶ Many elders have survived hardships such as war, migration, racism, and poverty. Their coping skills are often strong, even if they're not always recognized as such by mainstream health systems





# Promoting Mental Wellness in Seniors

Supporting mental health in seniors requires a multifaceted approach:

- ▶ **Encourage Social Engagement:** Promote participation in social activities, clubs, volunteer work, and intergenerational programs. Regular interaction can combat loneliness and foster a sense of belonging.
- ▶ **Harness Cultural Strengths:** Many African cultures, for instance, emphasize strong communal bonds, intergenerational respect, and the wisdom of elders. Promoting traditional storytelling, shared meals, community gatherings, and the active involvement of seniors in family and community decision-making can significantly enhance their sense of belonging, purpose, and mental well-being, directly countering isolation.
- ▶ **Support Physical Activity:** Regular, appropriate exercise has significant benefits for mood and cognitive function. Encourage activities like walking, swimming,

# Promoting Mental Wellness in Seniors cont...

- Promote Healthy Lifestyle: A balanced diet, adequate sleep, and limiting alcohol can positively impact mental well-being.

- Foster a Sense of Purpose: Encourage seniors to pursue hobbies, learn new skills, or engage in activities that give them meaning and a sense of contribution.

- Regular Health Check-ups: Ensure seniors receive regular medical evaluations to identify and manage chronic conditions, review medications, and screen for mental health concerns.

- Educate and Raise Awareness: Reduce stigma by educating seniors, their families, and caregivers about common mental health conditions and the importance of seeking help.

- Facilitate Access to Care: Connect seniors with mental health professionals, including therapists, psychiatrists, and support groups. Telehealth options can help overcome geographical and mobility barriers.

- Support Caregivers: Recognize and address caregiver burden, providing resources and support to those caring for seniors with mental health issues. Always Best Care Senior Services can be your go to service provider





## Lastly....

- ▶ The ageing and mental health landscape for Africans and other Black communities in the diaspora is complex, marked by historical injustices, ongoing discrimination, and unique migratory experiences. However, it is also characterized by profound resilience, rich cultural heritage, and strong community bonds.
- ▶ By adopting a comprehensive, culturally informed, and equity-driven approach, policymakers, healthcare providers, researchers, and community leaders can collectively work to dismantle barriers, foster mental well-being, and ensure that older adults across the African diaspora can age with dignity, health, and a profound sense of belonging.

Thank You