

African Americans as Health Partners

Getting the Most Out of Mental Health and Wellness



Many African Americans who need help for mental health and substance use disorders are not getting the help they need—or the services they do receive are not working well for them ([CDC, 2022](#)). There can be many reasons:

- Health, insurance, and information systems can be hard to navigate ([Tambling, D’Aniello, & Russell, 2021](#)).
- Traditional attitudes of stigma and shame about behavioral health conditions and mistrust toward providers can make it harder to decide to look for or accept help ([Mental Health America, 2023](#))
- Even in communities where appropriate and affordable services are available, many African Americans have not yet built up the “health literacy” skills to overcome these challenges and become effective partners in their own behavioral health care ([Muvuka, Combs, & Ayangeakaa, 2020](#)).

“Health partners” are people who: 1) ask important questions of their healthcare providers, 2) offer information that will help providers understand their conditions, and 3) ask providers to communicate with them in words that will help them make wise, well-informed decisions about their own health and health care. Health partners know they have a right to collaborate in all these ways, even if their providers seem to be in a hurry and often communicate in unfamiliar clinical words. And health partners show up for appointments prepared to honor that right.

Most of the suggestions on the back of this card are from an **excellent resource from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality called “Questions are the Answer.”** If you read through the pages on that website—and consider following their suggestions—you’ll be giving a valuable gift to yourself—and to your loved ones.



Being a Health Partner

Becoming a health partner starts with a decision to try to be one, and to follow as many of these steps as you can:

- Keep a notebook with questions and notes about your symptoms, and bring it to your next appointment.
- Tell your provider you're going to be taking an active role in your own health care.
- Ask your provider if you can make a voice recording of the information the provider gives you. (You might do it on your phone or bring a tape recorder.)
- Get out your notebook and read your questions to the provider. When they answer, repeat things back in your own words to make sure you understand—and keep asking until you get answers you understand.
- Write down all the answers your provider gives you, so you'll have a record of the visit.
- Write down the spelling of each medication's name, what it's used for, and its possible side effects.
- When you're considering a medical decision, ask questions (even hard ones) and speak your mind.
- If you're not sure what to do, remember: You have a right to ask for a second opinion from another qualified provider. People do it all the time.
- If you have questions or confusion after a session, call up and ask your provider—or if your provider has a physician's assistant, a nurse practitioner, or a nurse, you can start by asking them.
- If your provider isn't being a good partner, or if they won't be respectful, please find another provider.

An effective provider will respect your being an active partner in your health. And remember: Your health is worth it!