



## African American Behavioral Health

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# CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

### Can we study this history without being overwhelmed?

Only if you pace yourself—set limits on how much you want to be exposed to it. It's one thing to know that people of African descent were kidnapped and brought to this country to be sold and used as slaves, and that they have continued to be mistreated and discriminated against during their 400-year history here.

It's quite another thing to read about history in detail—the stories and statistics of this history:

- Images, sounds, details, and descriptions of people's experiences can reach past our more detached intellect, into the deeper parts of us that identify with people and empathize with their pain.
- When we study history, we learn the scope and the horror of the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual violence that took place during slavery, Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the massacres of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the ongoing fight against civil rights. The truth holds much pain, and the sheer weight of it can be traumatic.
- We might start to get a strong sense of how many harmful and inequitable policies, practices, and attitudes—in the past and in the present—have kept so many African Americans from living safe, healthy, free, well educated, financially secure, and sometimes even physically and emotionally tolerable lives. That might tempt us to lose our sense of hope for unity and progress in the future.

This history is fascinating, but it **is** overwhelming, and that might be one of the main reasons we avoid learning about it. If we're afraid that we'll lose hope, lose our tempers, or lose faith in ourselves or humanity as a whole, we might turn our attention away from truths that we need to hear:

- if we're going to use this information to make our services safer and more effective for the African Americans we serve, and
- if we're ever going to be effective partners in reviving health, hope, and faith in our communities.

As individuals, we may not be able to help running information about America’s racial history through:

- our own racial and cultural identities and “lenses,”
- the historical experiences of people who looked like us, and
- the many emotions connected with those experiences.

Of course, in the behavioral health field, we understand emotions, we respect their potential for healing, and we have tools that can help us handle them. We can use these tools to open our hearts and minds to history—and to keep ourselves emotionally and socially safe.

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