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Mental Health within Rap

I'm on the pursuit of happiness and I know everything that shine ain't always gonna be gold. -Kid Cudi, "The Pursuit of Happiness"

Happiness is one of the greatest causes of hope within individuals yet sometimes all we feel is hopelessness and the lonesome that comes with living in such a large world. Depressive thoughts, anxiety, and sadness are common things that many people have learned to cope with in the world and music is a universal language that encompasses all feelings people feel into melodious tunes. Over the past few years, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health has been a topic of discussion through many different mediums especially through the art of music. Regardless of people's backgrounds, music is unanimously listened to and provides a way for people to freely express emotions without judgment. How does music impact mental health, especially nontraditional music such as rap within the youth and men of color?

Mental health within minorities and its correlation to music

Despite the demand for conversations around mental health, its discussion within specific demographics is still limited. In general, women are more likely to get help when suffering from mental illnesses in comparison to men (American Psychological Association). According to the [NCHS Data Brief](#), only 26.4% of Black and Hispanic men ages 18 to 44 who experienced daily feelings of anxiety or depression were likely to have used mental health services, compared with 45.4% of non-Hispanic white men. There are extreme racial and ethnic differences in treatment

use and likeness to express their struggles. Many people of color are unable to access required treatment because they cannot afford to pay for medications and therapy.

Additionally, the concept of masculinity makes it difficult for men of color to open up. Many men believe that they will be perceived as weak and menial if they attempt to seek treatment. A study reported in [Behavioral Medicine](#) (Vol. 42, No. 3, 2016) found that racism and internalized masculinity norms influence black men's reluctance to seek medical help. This shows that black men are more likely to advocate this ideology correlated with masculinity: to put up a front of toughness and evade emotions. Typically men of color are seen to be more dangerous compared to white men and this stigma causes fewer men to seek help since they believe that no one is on their side. Jerry Tello, a psychologist who founded the [National Compadres Network](#), said "Black and brown people kill ourselves because we've been indoctrinated [about how bad we are] and now we believe that so that woundedness is very deep". Racism in mental health, masculinity, and avoidance of emotional expression are all causes that make colored men wary of speaking out about their struggles.

Although many people don't get professional help for their illnesses, there are other ways for people to cope with their struggles, one universal way being music. According to the Global Council on Brain Health (GCBH), a panel of scientists, health care professionals, and other experts did research on how music has a positive effect on mood, anxiety, and stress management. This report includes findings from the 2020 AARP Music and Brain Health Survey, a nationally representative survey of 3,185 adults that found that listening to music — whether in the background, by focused listening to recordings or at musical performances — had a small positive impact on mental well-being, depression, and anxiety (AARP). As previously mentioned, people of color were not able to get the help they needed for their illnesses due to the

expense of therapy and medications.

Music serves as a replacement for sedatives needed in patients with anxiety or anxious tendencies. Music is inexpensive, easily administered, and patients have more freedom, making it more available to everyone who needs help with treatment but can't access expensive medications. Music acts as an amenity to reduce stress and depression, increase one's mood and help with the management of pain and loneliness. Music remains an aid for focus, motivation, social connections and provides an outlet for expressing emotions that are difficult for some people. All of these benefits help alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other illnesses.

Why Rap?

Rap. When you think of rap music what pops up in your head? Violence. Drugs. Explicit behavior. Crime. The stereotype correlated with this genre of music is completely false and strongly influenced by the media. The younger generations have found rap music to be prevalent to them, hence the genre gaining popularity, as it provides the ability for young adults to channel their emotions into music in a hopeful manner. Despite the popularity it has gained, it remains to be controversial as many people still believe that it has negative effects on the youth because of its explicit content. Although this stereotype has influenced many people's opinions on rap music, more and more songs are being written about the mental struggles and issues that artists face, massively impacting the discussion around the mental image. Global data shows that adolescents between the ages of 16 and 24 are four times more likely to say that rap and hip hop is the genre that they prefer to listen to, meaning that rap artists have tons of power in their lyrics and how they impact younger generations. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illnesses, [16.5%](#) of U.S. youth aged 6-17 experienced a mental health disorder in 2016 (7.7 million people). Recent studies have found that the number of rap songs that address mental

illness has doubled in the past 20 years, but at the same time depression, anxiety, suicide rates, and other mental illnesses have risen a concerning amount among adolescents.

Because of the influence that they have over a colossal amount of people, rap artists can reduce stigma around the discussion with mental health and use that power to encourage more open discussion with mental health issues. Similar to the self-consciousness men have about expressing their struggles in mental health, rap artists are surrounded by this stigma of being invulnerable and resolute. In modern rap, many artists are becoming more open which gets noticed by their listeners. As young adults primarily serve as the majority of their audience, they see these artists as their role models, meaning that they are more likely to act and listen to the way that these rappers handle certain situations and issues. In the Newport Institute's report about Rap Songs and Mental Health, they concluded that 78 percent of the artists who wrote rap songs about mental health over the last decade were Black men, with an average age of 28 (Newport Institute). They thought that these findings were important because as mentioned before, these rappers are like role models, especially for the Black youth, a group that has a high risk of suicide. Between 2001 and 2017, the [suicide rate](#) for Black adolescents saw extremely troubling increases—rising by 60 percent among males and 182 percent for females (American Physiological Association). Rap also opens up a way for people to connect as many songs are personal and raw. These artists turn their experiences into poetic songs that can be heard by anyone in the world through streaming services. Despite not being calming, rap music leaves a profound effect on the minds of adolescents by validating their experiences and taking them out of solitude. It's not an endorsement of bad behavior but rather deep conversational stories derived from poetry leaving weighty effects on audiences. Rappers getting personal with their experiences assure that there isn't any shame in struggling or getting help.

Music Artists: Generational Icons

Many rap and hip-hop artists serve as role models and emblems of discussion within real-world issues that have been heavily recognized when it comes to mental health. There has been a spike in the movement with lessening substance abuse in hip hop and the effects have been prevalent through the youth. Artists such as Kid Cudi, Kendrick Lamar, and Frank Ocean have sworn to grow within changes in sobriety and a healthier mental mindset despite the stigma around drugs and other pressures in rap music as well as remaining transparent in their difficulties and struggles especially with mental health.

Kid Cudi, a rap emblem of mental health, serves as a role model through the vulnerability he imposes on his honesty about his mental health struggles. In his song, “Pursuit of Happiness”, he explores concepts of humanistic lust for foolproof happiness. He dictates his experiences of glamorizing substance use to find his everlasting happiness, as the lyrics insist that he is willing to endure anything to achieve his ultimate utopia. He deliberates about his journey induced in a spiraling lifestyle of substance abuse, anticipation, and regret, achieving happiness is something everyone desires despite knowing that there is a possibility that you might not be happy in the end.

Also, on his album KIDS SEE GHOSTS with Kanye West, on the song “Reborn”, he writes “had my issues, ain't that much I could do. But peace is something that starts with me, with me. At times, wonder my purpose. Easy then to feel worthless” (Cudi). He shows raw emotion in his struggles with his self-esteem, a symptom of depression, as he abused drugs to cope, but bounced back after checking in at a rehab facility, recognizing the root of his problems. The tribulations that he faced provide his audience the understanding that battling against mental struggles isn't a positive path and there will be life-altering situations that you will encounter.

In the article, “How Kid Cudi’s Music Helped Me Cope With Depression”, the author, Logan, talks about how Kid Cudi grapples with concepts of depression, loneliness, and sadness and how it brings ease towards listeners like himself as they don’t feel alone in the hardships that they are attempting to endure. He discusses how certain songs helped with his mental stability and inner struggles as he faced a difficult time in his personal life at the time of its release. From being isolated in shame to finding solace in Kid Cudi’s music, Logan was able to remove himself from this loneliness and use his music as an outlet for his feelings. His music shows that you can be vulnerable and strong at the same time and there’s no need to put up a front.

One of Cudi’s industry peers, Kendrick Lamar, has been coined the ‘street poet of mental health’, with his profound ways of dictating his experiences through his lyrics. From one of his most impressive pieces of work, the album *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*, he exposed his true emotions behind the struggle of growing up in Compton and accepting change, whether it be good or bad, into his life. This album focused on the tribulations of spending much of one's adolescence in a culture consumed by violence and drugs. In the song, “Swimming Pools”, Kendrick embodies a character that relates to alcohol misuse as he says, “I got a swimming pool full of liquor...Imma dive in it - Imma drown in some poison abusin' my limits" (Lamar). He describes the reason people drink alcohol: to kill their sorrows, to fit in, or to simply relish the feeling. The cover of this album has an image of Kendrick’s uncles, his grandfather, and his younger self sitting within reach of a bottle of malt liquor. Seeing Kendrick’s troubled childhood and struggles with sobriety, his music remains a way for young people to consider their own choices and resilience in a culturally relevant and accessible manner. Being a part of his fan base for years, I’ve been able to empathize with his struggles and story and take his perseverance that aided to his success and use it to overcome my mental battles. Kendrick Lamar serves to be a

role model, not only for the music community but within people of color as he discusses issues within mental instability in toxic neighborhoods like the ones he grew up in, acting as a voice for marginalized communities.

Along with Kid Cudi and Kendrick Lamar, Frank Ocean continues to be one of the most highly respected artists due to his ability to create such depth in his artistry that resonates with the youth like never before. Frank once tweeted about having depression, which wasn't much of a shock to anyone as his latest album, *Blonde*, combats feelings of anxiety and self-deprecation. Although he's very respected in his work there is a bit of backlash that comes with his brutal honesty for his feelings through his music as people think that his vulnerability is a display for attention. The mindset that people solely display their tribulations for attention is dangerous and results in people remaining depressed and silenced for decades. Frank himself has shown the utmost care that he possesses for his fans, but he has said that the pressure to fully satisfy the crowd is unnerving, resulting in debating on whether or not he would quit music. His vulnerability has brought out the vulgarity in his fans and fans of the music industry in general, proving that even the biggest of stars struggle with self-identity and illness, yet without pursuing help they can't achieve true bliss.

Carrington Kingsley, an African American man who was moved by the words of Frank Ocean, was having difficulty with accepting the fact that it was alright for him, as a black man, to be vulnerable and seek help for his insecurities. Listening to the song, *Nikes*, by Frank, he felt ashamed of who he was as a black man and constantly compared himself to others, but as Frank paid ode to [Trayvon Martin](#), Kingsley broke down in tears as he was haunted by this degrading voice in his ears. He knew that Frank was no stranger to mental illnesses and most of his fan base was aware of the tragedy that Frank endured, so Kingsley finally succumbed to the fact that he

was in dire need of therapy to deal with these condescending thoughts, as he said “Frank Ocean was the fulcrum in the battle for my mental health. Listening to this young black man be so free about his thoughts and the things that he struggled with every day made me realize that I could do that too” (Martin).

Conclusion

Although we might not realize it, music is a large part of everyday life, whether it be listening to your favorite song walking to class or turning on the radio when you’re stuck in traffic. Music remains to be a unanimous piece of art that elevates the moods of people. In communities where the stigma of getting help with one's mental struggles is frowned upon; it becomes difficult to deal with these emotions without professional help and acknowledgment. In rap music, artists that look to be strong-willed and stable open up about their struggles with finding happiness and bliss and fighting against mental illnesses and depressive thoughts. They serve to be great influences on the minds of young adolescents, the main demographic contributing to growing suicide rates. Especially during COVID-19, crippling mental health has become a commonality within adolescents through the essential confinements brought by the pandemic. Rap has gradually become an abstract way for artists to deal with mental health and provides profuse amounts of role models that relate with the younger generations. Music is only the start of the mental health revolution, through many different mediums of change, the conversation of mental health can rapidly progress allowing seeking help to become normalcy in society.

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