



# Recovery & Resilience:

## Lessons in healing from black women's stories

**The information in this document is taken from the report *Recovery and Resilience: African, African-Caribbean and South Asian women's narratives of recovering from mental distress*. This report explored what helped women in their healing process based on positive stories of recovery of 27 women from these communities.**

This document covers:

- How black women understand mental distress and recovery
- Activities which black women find supportive
- How professionals and services could provide help and support

It is aimed at black women, mental health professionals and service providers. We hope it gives voice to black women's experiences and provides insight on distress and recovery.

### Introduction

Good mental health means having a positive sense of identity and sense of control over who you are. Mental distress can occur when a person feels overwhelmed by their emotions, life situations and pressures from the society we live in.

Recovery is a process which involves making sense of one's distress experiences and finding ways to cope with or overcome them. For recovery to be meaningful and lasting, it should focus on the person's emotional world and their goals and expectations.

### Causes and nature of distress

Black women told us that they understood mental distress in a variety of ways.

**1. Personal:** emotions of bereavement and loss (including separation through migration and adoption); stress and trauma.

*"I think it was stress, lack of understanding, bottling up my feelings, not knowing who to talk to"*

**2. Family:** experiences of emotional neglect; sexual, psychological and physical abuse; domestic violence; anxieties about responsibilities and of fulfilling family expectations.

*"I was recovering from abuse and trauma and I had quite a lot of abuse through childhood and through my teens until I was 19, that's physical and sexual abuse. I think that's the basis of my mental distress or mental illness"*

**3. Social/cultural:** experiences of racial and sexual discrimination; cultural pressures to tolerate abusive behaviour; pressure to be a 'good' mother/daughter/sister; to be a 'strong' woman and resource for others; feeling controlled by power structures in society and cultural ideologies like shame and honour.

*"Sometimes you don't realise you were socialised in a particular way until when you are in a bad place and then you seek help and then your cultural norms suddenly act as a barrier... Because in my culture – this is the African and western world colliding... and both cultures, strangely enough, believe that if your husband beats you... it must be something you did. So the fault is all in the women and just no*

---

*responsibility on the man. Behave as you want, it's her fault, totally it's a no win situation."*

*"I think racism has had a big part to play in not feeling like I belong, not feeling accepted, not feeling like a valued person and that then contributed to having very low esteem, little confidence, devalued, disempowered"*

*"I thought that being sad and not having confidence is feminine. ... I thought it was a good thing to be... to be submissive... I should just be very submissive and feeling depressed inside is actually good."*

**4. Spiritual:** experiencing a loss of faith; spiritual crises; feeling connected to the pain and suffering of ancestors.

*"I talk about the slave trade and tears come. Do you understand me? My sister and I went to Ghana. We went to Elmina Castle, we went to Cape Coast Castle and we had these experiences and I brought my ancestors back with me."*

**5. Biological/Medical:** understanding distress as an illness caused by chemical imbalances, damage to brain or other physical causes. Distress was also caused by the stigma of diagnosis and the side effects of medication.

*"I don't feel so bad now because I am aware that 1 in 4 people suffer from mental health problems."*

*"Diagnosis is in some ways a little bit helpful because until I was given a diagnosis ... I was blaming myself so much, that it was completely me, so that's one thing that it did help. They put a label on it and I began to understand it."*

*"...when I take my medication my periods stop. This is something that really bothers me. My psychiatrist is a man and sometimes I wonder if he really understands how much it bothers me."*

## Meanings of recovery

Each person will recover in a different way. It is more than just managing 'symptoms' and may involve exploring emotions and the experiences which caused distress. Black women told us that supporting recovery from mental distress involves understanding a woman's unique experiences of 1) causes of mental distress, 2) circumstances under which mental distress arose and 3) gender, cultural and racial identities.

### 1. Causes of mental distress

It is important to acknowledge how someone understands the causes of their distress. Recovery is hindered when a black woman and a mental health

professional disagree about this.

*"Every time I see my psychiatrist she assesses me on biological symptoms of depression you know? Ok, she might say, are you hearing any voices, are you doing this or whatever but it's all about medication and it's all about symptoms. It's very tunnel visioned, it's not about how I function day to day, it's not about how I cope with feelings that come up day to day, how I function in my life."*

### 2. Circumstances under which mental distress arose

Many black women understand distress as a response to life events, spiritual crises, 'breakdown' due to trauma and stress and other cultural and personal explanations.

*"[What] I was recovering from was self-hate, feeling of self-hate, feeling of being alien... but I can understand why I felt that way from what had gone before and it's not seeing it as actually me being demonically possessed or me being mentally ill... it's an appropriate human response to a situation"*

### 3. Gender, cultural and racial identities

In supporting recovery it is important to understand the impact of culture and the experience of being a black woman. Some black women experienced confusion about their identity due to tensions between cultural pressures and personal needs, whereby they felt that they weren't allowed to be themselves.

Many black women were affected by racism and discrimination, including the continuing legacy of the historical oppression of black people through slavery and colonialism. Some women grew up in cultures with assumptions about women's roles and behaviour, which they found limiting.

*"A lot of black women go through a hell of a lot of mental distress... I am talking about our extended family, what our mothers have gone through and the whole thing about even slavery, the impact that slavery has had on black women... How we must dress and how we must talk and how we must be submissive and dominated and subservient and be abused and not love ourselves and all those different things."*

Some women also felt confused about their identities, arising from being of mixed heritage, a migrant and/or growing up as children of migrant parents, or trans-racially adopted.

*"When I went to school I was the only black child. But then the word black – not feeling like it fitted me... I didn't know any other people of colour. I didn't know the idea of being mixed-race. I'm not sure when the*

---

*concept of being mixed race first came to me but I must have been at least 15 or 16. Even then I still felt the pressure to wear this badge of black which just didn't work for me."*

Some black women experienced pressure from their families to hide their distress so as not to cause embarrassment or disqualify themselves from marriage.

*"... I was getting judged as well. I never attended any family functions... if I went I'd be seen as this 'ill' girl, so I would try to avoid people because my Dad said that if you expose yourself, expose that you are not well, they could be, oh you are a mentally ill girl... It really affected me, I was hard on myself, I wasn't out there, I had to hide myself..."*

## What helped healing?

### Black women drew strength from the following activities, which helped them recover from mental distress:

- Space to make sense of distress, to reflect on feelings and what they have been through
- Overcoming, or coming to terms with, experiences of oppression
- Finding strength to leave abusive situations, and getting support to come to terms with their effects
- Developing their self; emotionally, physically and spiritually
- Accepting their emotions as legitimate and being able to express them
- Taking things one step at a time
- Developing positive racial, cultural and gendered identities – a positive sense of identity as black women
- Meeting with other women with similar life experiences
- Regaining a sense of control over one's life
- Talking openly and honestly about their experiences with families and significant others
- Finding spiritual and/or religious grounding
- Access to complementary therapies; yoga, meditation, massages, and peaceful environments
- Creative activities; writing, art, photography, gardening
- Physical exercise
- Taking pride in appearance; controlling weight, wearing good clothes and feeling attractive
- Social interaction, relationships and community activities, including paid and voluntary work.
- Developing a sense of social justice through community participation, campaigns for equality, campaigns against violence, involvement in user/survivor movements

### Black women told us that when they are in distress it is useful when professionals:

- Listen and empathise
- Show kindness and gentleness
- Create space for talking about emotions
- See the person and understand the 'pre-story' to their distress, acknowledge the individual's understanding of social and experiential causes
- View distress in the context of life experiences
- Focus on recovery, not just managing symptoms
- Ask women what kind of support they would like and discuss the full range available
- Consider alternatives to medication, offer talking therapies as a first option
- Take women's concerns about medication 'side effects' (such as hair loss, weight gain and effect on menstrual cycle) into account
- Are mindful of women's own notions of recovery and work with it rather than setting targets that are not connected to the individual's needs and goals.
- Prioritise safety within mental health services through single sex wards and separate facilities for women
- Recognise the impact of inequality and discrimination; racism, sexism, cultural oppression
- Understand how family dynamics contribute to distress and recovery
- Enable immediate families to support the person in distress
- Are aware of possible tensions between cultural expectations which may place an emphasis on the 'collective', and assumptions of professionals and services which may place an emphasis on the 'individual'.

### Black women told us that professionals' communication style had a key role to play in enabling recovery:

- Professionals who offered beneficial support listened, learned about the individual, offered choice, acknowledged experiences and emotions, promoted independence, autonomy, encouraged self-discovery, transformation and growth.

Women felt: encouraged, valued and nurtured.

- Professionals who offered obstructive 'support' did not engage on an emotional level, were directive, issued instructions, were coercive, made assumptions, were insensitive to their use of power and control.

Women felt: ignored, isolated, judged, punished, powerless.

This communication style may replicate the abuse which caused the original distress.

---

## Some Useful Contacts

The Afiya Trust  
www.afiya-trust.org  
Email: info@afiya-trust.org  
Tel: 020 7582 0400

Centre for Emotional Health  
www.centreforemotionalehealth.com  
Email: info@centreforemotionalehealth.com  
Tel: 0208 144 0536

Cooltan Arts  
www.cooltanarts.org.uk  
Email: 020 7701 2696  
Tel: 020 7701 2696

Diverse Minds  
www.mind.org.uk/diverseminds  
Tel: 0208 215 2222

Nafsiyat – Intercultural Therapy Centre  
www.nafsiyat.org.uk  
Email: admin@nafsiyat.org.uk  
Tel: 020 7263 6947

National Domestic Violence helpline  
www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk  
Tel: 0808 2000 247

Newham Asian Women's Project  
www.nawp.org  
Email: info@nawp.org  
Tel: 020 8472 0528

Post Adoption Centre  
www.postadoptioncentre.org.uk  
Email: advice@postadoptioncentre.org.uk  
Tel: 020 7284 0555  
Advice Line: 020 7284 5879

The Samaritans  
Tel: 020 8394 8301  
Email: admin@samaritans.org  
Helpline: 08457 909090  
Email: jo@samaritans.org

Southall Black Sisters  
www.southallblacksisters.org.uk  
Tel: 0208 571 9595  
Helpline: 0208 571 0800

Survivor Research  
www.survivor-research.com  
Email: info@survivor-research.com  
Tel: 0208 640 9052

Women and Girls Network  
www.wgn.org.uk  
Tel: 020 7610 4678  
Helpline: 020 7610 4345

## Acknowledgements

This document was written by Beth Collier, with Jayasree Kalathil, based on the report 'Recovery and Resilience: African, African-Caribbean and South Asian women's narratives of recovering from mental distress,' Mental Health Foundation & Survivor Research, 2011. The full report is available at: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/recovery-and-resilience](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/recovery-and-resilience)

We are grateful to:

- All the women who took part in the original research and shared their stories and insights with us
- Dan Robotham at the Mental Health Foundation for his editorial input
- The National Mental Health Development Unit for commissioning this work