Espisode 6

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**A'Milliana:** Hello. Welcome back to the Be Well M U podcast with your co-host A'Milliana and Yessenia, and today's episode is the Black Mental Health Experience and we have a special guest. Not only my mentor, but a dear friend of mine Brianna Simmons, so she could tell you a little bit more about herself.

**Brianna:** Hi everybody. My name is Brianna Simmons. I work at Marymount in the Office of Wellness as the case manager and chair of Marymount s Care team. I'm no stranger to the Marymount community. I was also a student. I graduated in 2020 with my bachelor's in psychology and now I'm here as a staff member in the Office of Wellness. Yeah, glad to be on here it's fun.

**A'Milliana:** So today's episode we will be talking about the mental health stigma and the mental health topic within the black community. So basically how it's viewed and the current state of it. So the first question is [00:01:00] how is it viewed in households and what is being said about it?

**Brianna:** I can go first. So I grew up in a really big family, a black middle class family. Mental health was sort of a conversation in my household. My dad actually is a pastor of our church and so we grew up very religious. And so with religion, you know, you often hear the rhetoric of. Praying things away, or you know, if you're feeling sad or depressed, God's got it and God's going to handle it. But thankfully my dad was a lot more progressive in his teachings to us as his children and then us within the church as well. So he really believed in theology as well as therapy. So those mental health conversations were not too taboo in our household. Around middle school, my mom started to introduce to our siblings mental health days. So once we started like seventh, eighth grade, if we ever [00:02:00] felt mentally overwhelmed or mentally stressed out, we would able to use a mental health day where she wouldn't let us go to school. We could just decompress, relax, sleep in, and kind of recharge. The next day. So

**A'Milliana:** yeah, so progressive

**Brianna:** Cause she only introduced it when we were in middle school, when we kind of got a handle on like being autonomous and really taking charge of our academics. And so when we were able, we were able to and allowed to voice like, you know, I'm just not feeling it today. And I don't feel like going to school.

I'm overwhelmed, I'm stressed out. She's like, okay, get back in bed. It's a mental health. It's like, oh, great, pull the covers over, just recharged. So thankfully in my household, it's a, a common practice and then it became even more common with Covid being introduced and now all of my siblings are back at home during that time.

And so journaling became a practice for our family. We did quiet [00:03:00] hours. So just an hour. No TVs were on. No music was playing. You were either to read. or to journal during that stressful time. So nice. . I spearheaded that , so I take the credit for that for my family. But yeah, it's a really normalized conversation, thankfully in my household.

**A'Milliana:** That's really cool. Yeah. Oh my god. Okay. I'm sorry because that like, you don't really hear about that. Like in black households and like, I wanna really hone in on something. Black does not only mean African american.. Black can also mean Afro-Latina . Black can also mean so many other things. And I feel like a lot of people don't really think about it because they automatically associate African American with black and that's just, that's not it. You're like singling out a lot of other black people. Right. So in the African American household, typically it's viewed as being a weakness. Yeah. And an excuse for many harsh [00:04:00] realities. Many African Americans face. I know for me personally it started out like that within my grandparents. I really found that type of like, oh, , that's an excuse just to get outta school, because I was like feeling down or anything like that. But my mom, she would actually play something called hooky with me. And she , she'll take me outta school and like when she knows. . It's been a little rough because my mom was a single mom.

I didn't have my father in my life, so that was like really hard for me. And she recognized that and instead of just like saying, oh, just push through it she kind of, did somewhat what your family did, but not to that extent.

**Brianna:** Or not even calling it that.

**A'Milliana:** Yeah, not calling it

**Brianna:** will call it hooky, like we're just gonna have a relaxation day.

But it's really, let's connect that. Let's call a spade a space. Connect that to your mental health and call it a mental health day. Recognize that. mentally, you just need a recharge. And going back to your other point, [00:05:00] generationally, like our black grandparents or black aunties and uncles they'll see like, what does a 12 year old need a mental health day? Like you have no bills to pay you stress to handle but society has moved rapidly since then. And stress is introduced way earlier than. May seem or take credit more like students are going through a lot with the age of social media and moving more towards a post covid era with technology and being a part of Zoom Room, being in online classes, like it's a whole new realm of stress now that our older people in our lives wouldn't understand. .

**A'Milliana:** Yeah. I wanna actually touch on something that you did mention within your own experiences being the religious aspect of it. And like I know like a lot of people have horror stories. When it came to that, Yessenia, what's like your take on the religious aspect of mental health within families.[00:06:00]

**Yessenia:** It's complicated. I think religion plays a big role in, in how we see the world and how we make sense of the world. Why It can be a very valuable aspect of our lives. We choose to like align to a religion and. spirituality, so I think it has its positives. , and also in that same line, because it can play such a big goal if you're part of a community that in some ways use certain things as negatives or detriments such as like aspects of your identity or ways that you choose to live your life then it can potentially have like a negative impact on yourself. Right. And how you're viewing yourself. I think with religion as with most things in the world, you have to kinda be very mindful of like how it's informing how you're looking at yourself. . And how it's impacting that image you hold up yourself. Ideally it's going to amplify a lot of these things mm-hmm. and be like a so source of support. And [00:07:00] I think that's what religion can and this best for us. But unfortunately a lot of the times the more traditional or very rigid thinking perspectives, it can be a very different experience for certain folks.

**A'Milliana:** No, definitely. I definitely agree with that. Oh my gosh. When it comes to religion, for me it, I have like a whole entire different story when it comes to religion because like, it was like an evolutionary period for me because I was taught something and then I was questioning in it because of the practices that I've seen within my own community. Because I was raised Southern Baptist so that. There's a lot of stigmas with mental health when it comes to that, and that kind of aided in me questioning my faith as well and I thank God every day because I think after that period in my life because that actually made my faith stronger, and that really opened me up

so I really think that religious aspect within the whole entire topic of mental health and [00:08:00] The black community is something very important because it means a whole lot and like a lot of people really talk about in other communities, religion is like a big thing. for a lot of communities when it comes to mental health.

So it's like kind of funny to see like the common denominator and things like the different communities. We all have the same type of struggle when it comes to that

**Brianna:** because this was something that I researched heavily. , the black church and mental health in African Americans and just how historically religion in the church has been. Foundational base for African Americans in general, like it was a place for them to be comfortable, a place for them to congregate with other like-minded individuals and to really have a solid place where they were somebody like during, back in the times of, you know Jim Crow and slavery. Like they could be somebody in church and they could release and talk with their pastor, talk with family and friends in a candid way, and kind of [00:09:00] restore them, refresh them mentally. As well as spiritually. So, there are some aspects that. the church can really build up and rejuvenate one's mental health. But kind of like what Yessenia was saying, like you do have to have some type of discernment to see, okay, is this serving me well spiritually as well yeah. Mentally and emotionally and physically.

**Yessenia:** It's kind of just speaking to what you're saying, like a lot of the times when religion is historically so intertwined with a culture. It almost becomes like just the same thing essentially. . You know, like there are certain communities that they may not necessarily connect individually to a religion, but it's so much part of the culture that , it just is part of your reality. Yeah. And so that discerning between what. you view as an individual, as your values and what the religion or the traditions view that that is like a growing pain sometimes. And it's, I think, an important step to take to really like [00:10:00] own how you see the world and who you are

in all of it. .

**A'Milliana:** Yeah, no, I definitely agree with that. I wanna say like, oh, like everything's bad when it comes to mental health in like the black church. Because there are, but people don't really actually see it as helping and aiding in their mental health. So that's actually like Really? Yeah. Like the simple, I never thought of it like that. Yeah.

**Brianna:** The simple act of seeing. like a, church friend. is a recharge of your mental health. Yeah. Like, you're just sitting next to them. You're just hearing a song. , that's a positive effect on one's mental health if they're receiving the song well, and if they're receiving that friendship. Well just, you know, sitting there being quiet, being still listening to a sermon, a word, a song, or, you know, a simple church announcement. Like a, a calming experience for an individual.

**A'Milliana:** No, definitely. I never really thought about it like that, like that week. That's actually like a healthy mental health practice.

**Brianna:** Yeah, it can be.

**Yessenia:** And just to [00:11:00] add one thing, like really appreciate that as we're talking about mental health as a topic, we're thinking about it in more than just one layer because oftentimes I think when mental health as a buzzword gets thrown out there, it's mainly centered on this perspective of like mental illness. Which is a part of the conversation, but it's not the whole conversation. . And I think that's where a lot of stigma can occur because, you know, communities don't really wanna explore or even think about, or even name things like mental health. . Cause they immediately, their mind goes to the, those corners of this topic. But it is about like community. It is about finding those supports. It's about finding. aspects of your identity. It's about, and I think at the heart of it, is recognizing your emotions and normalizing feeling things like not feeling to be at home. All of that is mental health.

**Brianna:** Right. And that's what the black church can do for people. That's what religion can do, like mm-hmm. , that's where crying is acceptable. , like if you're moved by a song, [00:12:00] you're, moved by a servant. . You see somebody crying. It's like, oh, yes, she was touched by the spirit. We'll give her or him their moment. Yeah. It's not looked at as a weakness as it could be.

It's actually like just in school or at home. Kinda home. Celebrated. Yeah. And celebrated. It's accepted. It's like, okay, she's having a moment. He's having a moment. Yeah. Let them, you know, cry it out, you know? Scream, shout. The Baptist fits, you know? , the praise. Dancing in the corner. That's all. acceptable. There, you can really release those emotions in a church or religious setting. And a lot of black people tend to do that.

**A'Milliana:** Yeah. I wanna touch on something that you said way back when it came to de generational thing. how black people have faced Jim Crow, police brutality, colorism, racism, you name it, we've gone through it. Do you think socioeconomic positions and challenges have an effect on people of color's mental health? Because I personally think it does. I think it is like one of the [00:13:00] one. , big driving forces within many of the struggles that we do have. , I mean, specifically blacks tend to report low levels of psychological wellbeing and focused on measures such as life satisfaction and happiness due to what's occurring in society.

. So I personally feel that that's one of the the biggest things. , like within the community that we can all like pretty much share like Okay, that's mentally tough for literally anybody. And it does affect the mental wellbeing. I know it affected my mental wellbeing too, because I remember I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood. I didn't really experience racism. , I didn't really know too much about that. And vividly, I remember when I was four years old. Being told that I was black and not feeling anything by like, yeah, I'm black, so what . But when I'm walking to a store and I'm seeing a white woman look at me weird [00:14:00] and then I vividly remember, like I used to have this big puff ball, like I used to wear big ponytails and my big afro, like my mom, she wanted, she never wanted me to straighten my hair or nothing. She wanted me to grow natural. and she tried to pet like my puff. And I'm like, well, I didn't see nothing wrong with it at the time, but I visibly saw my mother, you know, bothered by that. And I asked her, and that's when I really found out. And that was like kind of, it was hurtful to me and I think it really stuck with me and it mentally affected me because it showed me, okay, people had like some type of ill intent behind the actions that you do. So I wanted to know like, how do y'all feel about the challenges that people of color are faced with and how that affects their mental wellbeing?

**Brianna:** I think [00:15:00] like social media. And. News and media outlets have exacerbated it like so much more. Like with the, the first trial of Trayvon Martin back in 20 15, 20 16 all of the documented recorded police brutality scenes that we've seen and those public trials, it's just in your face all the time.

All the time. So yeah, just seeing. based on somebody's color of their skin like it could happen to anybody. It could happen to me. It could happen to a, a brother of mine, a sister of mine. Like, it's, it's scary and it weighs on a person's mental health and wellbeing because it's just at the forefront. Of the conversations. Or sometimes it's at the forefront of the conversation, but people aren't diving deep to the real or true issues and that can cause frustration, that can cause anger. Okay. We're just in this wheel of this bad thing circulating and being at the forefront of [00:16:00] my phone, my timeline, my feed they can feel like there's no way of escaping it. And so they internalize it and then it weighs more heavily on their mental wellbeing and health.

**Yessenia:** Yeah. The exhaustion that comes along with getting exposed to the same story. Yes. I think another part of this is you know, kind of to what you were, the story you shared.

**A'Milliana:** Mm-hmm.

**Yessenia:** I think people of color and black people in this country specifically, it's the only experience I've had growing up and living here. Yeah. They can vividly remember moments like that, right? Mm-hmm. , where they were in, in their face, they confronted something that made them feel othered. And different and. you can probably name different moments throughout your life that kind of play into that. And that, that kind of goes to that idea of like microaggressions and you know, like I think those things has [00:17:00] that little word of micro in it, but it's not little because it, I think every one of those experiences really weathers on people and it can add to that exhaustion, right? And so you're navigating the world and you're doing the best that you can. and all these little moments are happening and big moments. to your point of like the new stories and the exhaustion that comes with that. So you're already kind of like operating at a lower battery level than most people and, and also having to do even more, right? Like if you think about navigating different systems black folks and people of color like are having to really go through a lot of extra hoops to prove themselves essentially.

**Brianna:** Or even just not knowing how to process such emotions, like how to process your anger, your like, your feelings of anger, your feelings of frustration, your sadness, because how can you display that? Like how can you let that out, pour that out in a way that's acceptable, and you're not gonna be labeled as an angry black woman, you know, now, [00:18:00] oh gosh, well maybe we should just stop talking about this topic altogether. It's like, no, I, I wanna talk about it. I just need to get these feelings out. Let's recognize it. Like how do you navigate those emotions? And I think that's a big part of the challenge and how that can be a big part of how it weighs heavily on Yeah, black individuals mental health.

**A'Milliana:** I think like the perfect example like this just came to mind, the perfect example, like of a black community being mad, but not knowing what to do with it would be the Freddie Gray riots. Right? Yeah. It, it showed that they were angry not only about Freddie Gray, but about the treatment of black people. But they did it in a way that wasn't so con conducive to society.. And it was just overall unfortunate. But peaceful protest is something that is. an outlet to display, your anger display every negative emotion that you have concerning all the challenges that are set against you in a way that you [00:19:00] would be heard. You can display healthily and you actually can enact change. And I think that's one of the most important things that we are now starting to realize in the creation of social media, showing us. I think that's like one of the most healthy practices that has come out of all of this. For real, for real. What about you? Like what type of other healthy practices have y'all seen or you think should actually,

**Yessenia:** yeah, I mean I think this brings me back to like a lot of the conversations that were coming up after George Floyd. Right. Like the reckoning of conversations that happen in all the different spaces of like school work, everything even among friends, I think. But I think it's hard to kind of like prescribe one formula around this. I think we're all so individual and our needs are so different and how we process situations is so unique and so even just opening up that door to allow yourself to acknowledge what it is you're feeling and what it is you're needy , that's so important, [00:20:00] right? Because, you know, some people found themselves in the position of like, I just feel so sucked and like, so angry and I don't even wanna do anything. And I think that's a valid response, right? And then there were other people who were like, I'm ready to do things. I'm ready to like protest and like, do more be an activist . And I think that's also a valid response, just , it's important to recognize that there isn't only one way to approach it, and you really just have to be mindful of what it is that might work best for you and what you're needing in that moment. And then it might change from time to time, right? Like maybe today you wanna shut the world out and not can we look at the news and not really think about. and then tomorrow you might find yourself out in the streets, like in a peaceful protest. , I think it, it really is important to just kind of like have that conversation and reflect about it and what you need in that moment.

**Brianna:** I think that's very important too. Like we've, like, during that time, like the main prescribed thing was to protest and then others [00:21:00] felt guilty that I don't know what to say. Like, I don't know. What to tweet. I can. , I don't feel safe going out to protest. , like I'd rather just stay home and just reflect and people looked at that as negatively. and I think that's, . I'm really glad that you brought that out, that there's no one prescribed outlet. Like if one case happens, it can be isolated from the next, like how you reacted to that can be different from how you reacted to one down the road or one, three years ago. Like you can have an outlet to protest and be an activist and then another setting or another time, you can be self-reflective in just journal. you know, have a social media cleanse. Be out of the conversation that can be healthy for your mental health and you can, you are a thousand percent correct in subscribing to that form of outlet.

**A'Milliana:** I definitely agree with both the outside and yeah, I think that was [00:22:00] needed to be heard more importantly, so, yeah. I'm gonna wrap this up. Thank you so much, Brianna, for coming and talking with us.

**Brianna:** Thank this fun. ,

**A'Milliana:** I'll forever, always thank Yessenia. Because she took the time. I'm outta her busy, busy schedule to do this because she understands how important it's, and it's important for her too. And you know, it's always great to have somebody to actually go to and talk to about all these things cuz they're harsh things to talk about sometimes for a lot of people. So yes, you can find the full transcript on Marymount edu and we'll be back with another episode. Be sure to listen to the next podcast episode called # Take the pressure off where we discuss women's mental health and the beauty and entertainment industries.