

WOMEN OF COLOR - OUR HEALTH IS A PRIORITY

By Pat Turner

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about women of color and health. Growing up, I had no conversations with my mother or any other adult females about health. What I remember is a kind of secrecy about most things health-related, up to and including things specific to being female. Secrets will and do kill us.

Mental health was especially taboo although, in nearly every family, there was someone who behaved a little unusually. When we asked what was wrong with them, we were told, "That's just the way they are." We knew to never open that door again. Yet we can't have a conversation about women and physical health without also talking about mental health.

All women are impacted by sexism, but women of color face both sexism and racism, and if you happen to also be gay, you can add heterosexism to the mix. If you belong to multiple marginalized communities, and the model inside your home is women who put everyone else's needs ahead of their own, at the expense of themselves, you don't learn to think well about yourself and your own health. Additionally, if the only images and/or messages you've gotten from outside your home are negative because of your sexual orientation, gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc., you are left with little sense of your value or worth and no sense of why putting attention on your health and well-being matters.

Oppression of any form impacts one's mental health, and if mental health is compromised, poorer physical health won't be far behind. Looking back, it's clear to me now that some of the women around me when I was growing up struggled with mental health issues that impacted how they addressed, or more often, didn't address their physical health issues.

How do we make a paradigm shift and not repeat what some of our moms and women elders did to us by not providing information about mental and physical health to their female children? For the record, it was not their fault that they gave us so little information. They received very little, if any, themselves, so how could they pass it on? To change the paradigm for the next generation, we have to be honest about that family member with the unusual behavior, name it for what it is, and have conversations about what mental health is and how important it is. We need to explain that going to see a mental health professional is just as rational and necessary as going to see a general practitioner.

We also need to have conversations about diet and exercise. Women of color have higher rates of obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure than other groups of women. I have struggled with weight my entire life, and I think that if I had received different information I might not have. Let's talk, too, about the importance of not just going to see health care professionals when there's something wrong with us, but also to prevent bad things from happening to us. And when the health care professional gives us guidance on what to do to better care for our bodies, we need to follow that guidance, and not make excuses for continuing unhealthy behaviors. Finally, we might want to consider having a health care buddy. This is a person whom we can tell all of our health-related concerns and information. Nothing about our health would be kept secret from this person. Again, secrets will kill us.

Men, you too, play a vital role in women's health care journey. You get to insist that the women in your life value themselves and take care of their health. Ask the women you love about their preventive health care, and if you observe changes in their health, speak up. Ask them specifically how you can support them around their health. They will welcome this attention.

I'm so pleased to have a Vice President who is a woman and a woman of color. The world needs more of us in leadership positions, but such leadership demands that we not neglect our health. Let's make 2021 the year that women of color take our own health and well-being seriously. Are you on board?