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LEADING STORIES

Mindstylz: Making personal connections

By Phyllis Hanlon

When the Connecticut Psychological Association (CPA) promoted depression screening day in 2003 in collaboration with a hair salon in New Haven, the organization's members knew they were on to something important. The success of the one-day effort prompted the creation of Mindstylz, a program designed to increase mental health awareness in communities of color.

The Ethnic Diversity Task Force (EDTF) of the CPA developed Mindstylz, according to Røe LeBlanc Gunter, Ph.D., EDTF chair, diversity representative for CPA and counselor at Western Connecticut State University. She reports that psychologists were searching for an effective way to reach African-American women and determined that a hair salon presented the ideal venue. "In communities of color, when individuals go to a hair stylist, they often share what is going on in their lives," she says. "Because they go every other week, individuals usually become close to the stylist."

Gunter further explains that hair stylists are the first to notice changes in a woman's hair, which might indicate stress or some other underlying issue. "There's stigma to go outside the community and seek help, but the stylist can normalize the fact that we all have issues and sometimes need help," she says.

So far, 11 hair stylists and barbers in five salons in Danbury, Stratford and New Haven have undergone training for the Mindstylz program. Gunter says, "We go into the salon on an off-day, offer breakfast or lunch and give a didactic presentation of anxiety and depression. We teach stylists how to make a referral." She explains that stylists are trained to determine when an issue is too much for them and are given tools and techniques that help direct their clients toward mental health professionals.

EDTF members offer tips on how to make referrals and engage in role-playing activities to reinforce the lessons. Gunter reports that a post-test three or four months after the initial training assesses how well the stylists have retained the information. "Participants performed 31.25 percent better on the post-test after the training workshops in terms of understanding symptoms of anxiety and depression," says Gunter.

According to Gunter the task force also created a "directory of professionals of color who will be culturally sensitive to our issues." This resource, which includes social workers, licensed professional counselors and psychologists, is divided by specialty area and language and is available at salons and online. The booklet also contains a list of local mental health facilities.

Mindstylz currently operates on a volunteer basis. "We are in the process of looking for funding. We need a program coordinator to make arrangements and do training for mental health providers," says Gunter. "We would like to expand across the state, make connections with technical schools with cosmetology programs. We would also like to continue to find more salons to train and do some regional hair shows."

Gunter asserts that the program has been successful in its efforts. "Everyone who has participated appreciates the training and has learned a lot. We just need financial support," she says.

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