Strengths and Protective Factors in African-American Families and Communities

Individuals (and families and communities) have an inherent power to create positive change, and this power can be an instinctive source of knowledge and healing. This strength resides in untapped reservoirs of physical, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, social, and spiritual resources and competencies. Providers can help clients become aware of this power and encourage them to call on it when faced with challenges. Helping a client to become aware of his or her strengths involves reflecting on the impact of the environment on individuals and families and existing adaptive capacities that have allowed the individual to survive despite an oppressive or catastrophic environment.[8], [9]

Strengths and protective factors in African American families and communities[10], [11], [12] include:

Religious or spiritual orientation

The African-American ethos is spiritual. It derives from the African heritage and has been maintained by shared experiences and common historical circumstances.[13] Spiritual orientation creates a collective ethos that has caused men and women to rise up and take a stand, regardless of the consequences. This spiritual connection is essential to the African-American worldview. The connection is seen in church membership, church attendance, a sense of right and wrong, teaching moral values, and a shared religious core. For many, the church serves as the center of community life.

Sense of racial pride

African-Americans have a strong cultural orientation and sense of racial pride. Elders pass on culture and pride in culture by telling children about African-American history, discussing racism in the family, telling children what it is like to be African-American, and showing preference to be identified as an African-American person. Observable aspects of African-American culture include funerals, folklore, dance, song, ways of dressing, clothing, etiquette, child-rearing practices, and child-naming

practices.

Resourcefulness

Many African Americans have a sense of competence that helps them manage risk situations effectively. Empowerment involves discovering this inherent power within people and identifying, facilitating, or creating contexts in which people can gain influence over decisions that affect their lives. A sense of empowerment helps individuals to trust their sensibilities and link themselves to networks of resources. Community and neighborhood are renewable and expandable sources of strength and resources. Talents and skills related to resourcefulness include self-reliance, self-sufficiency, independence, and the ability to cope with crises.

Family unity and strong kinship bond

Family unity and kinship bonds create a sense of belonging to a network of supportive individuals or groups that respect and nurture strengths. Membership in these groups entails the notion of social support, such as caring, fellowship, love, affection, and instrumental support, such as money, goods, and services. In addition to being able to *receive* support, families that have membership in a network must also *give* support to others in the network. This engenders feelings of self-worth and self-esteem as individuals recognize that they have something to offer to others and in turn are valued by them. The traditional sense of family involves a sense of cohesiveness, family pride, family togetherness, and commitment to the group—the family comes first. Furthermore, families are adaptable and flexible in terms of roles, and family members often share responsibilities and communicate frequently with each other.

Strong desire for education

Although the African-American culture has been characterized by a strong orientation toward acquiring knowledge, the means by which the learning was accomplished has varied markedly. Education in the African-American culture continues to incorporate both formal and informal systems. Formal systems of education have not always been available or accessible to African Americans. Informal methods such as modeling and mentoring; apprenticeship, craftsmanship, and entrepreneurial programming; and school learning (whether in public, private, independent, or church schools) continue to be important avenues of education, instruction, and training for African Americans.

Community involvement

Communities and neighborhoods possess powers of transformation that social institutions or public policies may not recognize. Regeneration of communities and neighborhoods involves spiritual and psychic energy and the power of the mind to interpret and reframe events in ways that are manageable for individuals and families. African Americans may fuel regeneration through religious faith and recognition of their common history of overcoming oppressive

circumstances. Community implies service to others, and being a community member involves active participation in community organizations.