



BLACK YOUTH VOICE

“That is what the Black Youth Voice means to me. It contains hardship and joy. Restraint and expression. Sincerity and silliness. It contains multitudes and explodes any box someone might want to put us in. As my youth concludes I want to empower the ones who follow me to find their own voice and use it. We’ll be amazed at what they say”

– Donovan Hayden



The Kit for Centering Black Youth Wellbeing:
Call-In-Cards for Anti-Black Racism Action
by YouthREX

BLACK YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The mental health of Black youth and their emotional wellbeing is impacted by experiences of anti-Black racism, including being stigmatized and marginalized, with a lack of accessible, affordable, and culturally responsive supports – as well as interventions that can promote their wellbeing.



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INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

The identities of Black youth are multilayered and nuanced. Anti-Black racism interlocks with other structures of oppression, and intersections of race and colour, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and religion, etc., to shape the experiences of Black youth. The narrative of Blackness or of Black as a monolithic category ignores the diversity among Black communities.



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ALLYSHIP

An ally is someone who recognizes that the privilege they have in relation to others is a result of the unjust patterns of a society – and commits to changing these patterns.



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1.1.

Jamal is 17. He's active in his Toronto social housing building and frequently cares for his young brother while his mom is at work. When Jamal's high school teacher asked him about his 40 community service hours, mandatory for graduation, he didn't think about the hours he already volunteered in his building or his mom's church. After being advised that he risked not graduating if he didn't complete these hours, Jamal stopped attending church events to volunteer at a food bank. He went to the food bank on seven separate days with the same non-Black supervisor, but she never seemed to remember his name or backstory, and kept mistaking him for someone doing service hours for the youth criminal justice system.



BLACK YOUTH VOICE

1.2.

"Something struck me as I passed by my old high school: two big posters advertising the school each displayed two white male students and two Asian female students. This high school is a strong academic public school. The school is predominately Black with a considerable South Asian and Hispanic population. The posters dismiss the many Black students that make the school what it is, not just in numbers but in character. I thought about my fellow classmates of colour and I who were on sports teams, participated in school clubs, and consistently made the honour roll. The poster made me feel that the efforts we put in would never be good enough because we do not have white skin."



BLACK YOUTH VOICE

1.3.

"In ... sixth grade ... the school nurse asked my mom if I was sexually active. Like, what? I didn't know anyone that had sex. And it was so crazy to me. And then just thinking, like, she would never think to ask my white friend that. But, since I'd never thought about that before, they were basically introducing me to these topics right then!"



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1.4.

"For Black youth in schools, it's like, 'Oh, he has an attitude problem,' 'Oh, this is insubordination.' Even when you see just in general the word 'attitude' being applied ... it's usually not applied to white youth. It's applied to Black youth. They're like, 'Oh, you should have known better, you should have known this and that.' So they're not even acting like we're children. It's like, well, like I'm still a kid. Like I still mess up. But it just seems like you hit, like a specific age, like 13-years-old, and anytime you do anything wrong, it's, 'Oh, you should know better.' So you're gonna get like the worst punishment possible."



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CALL TO ACTION

How can this be made right?

What can I/we do to support racial healing?

How it works ↓

**The
kit**

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BLACK YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

2.1.

Jabo, now 21 and at the University of Ottawa, felt at a loss in the pandemic's early days. He was in Grade 12 then and had big plans for graduation and beyond. When everything was suddenly cancelled, Jabo found himself feeling helpless and anxious about his future, but he chose not to tell his parents about his struggles: "I didn't understand it as a problem to be shared. It's just not something that's brought up." His family moved to Canada in 2009; being newcomers meant his parents had to worry about a lot of things — from employment to housing and more. "That doesn't leave space for talks on mental health," Jabo said.

"The cultural perception of mental health is, like, of people being crazy."



BLACK YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

2.2.

"I have experienced bullying by college colleagues that resulted in triggering my suicidal depression. I have experienced ableist bullying at my previous office workplace in which I was verbally and socially bullied by co-workers and supervisors for being 'slow' and different... I have experienced blatant, overt or explicit homophobia, biphobia, and ableism from close immediate relatives, and anti-Black racism from the mostly non-Black POC community I reside in. I do not feel safe, valued or accepted outside of the emotional support from my assigned Social Worker."

-YouthREX OYC Survey Participant



BLACK YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

2.3.

"I remember feeling targeted by my high school teacher. He consistently put me down, questioned my beliefs (I am a Black hijab-wearing Muslim), and made inappropriate comments... This was done publicly in front of a room full of 27 students. I felt humiliated, picked out, and depressed. I began questioning my identity and beliefs because this was only happening to me and my friends did not understand my frustration. People chose to believe that his comments were jokes and that I should learn to not take the comments too seriously."

-YouthREX OYC Survey Participant



BLACK YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

2.4.

Angel is a counsellor in a youth mental health agency. In addition to providing therapy, Angel engages in extensive client advocacy and family work. Youth see Angel, a young Black queer woman, as a role model. In a team meeting, Angel chats with her colleague, Sarah, a white counsellor. The talk shifts towards compensation. Angel is stunned to learn that her hourly wage is \$10 less than Sarah, though their qualifications are similar and their titles and job descriptions are the same. Sarah explains that she negotiated better and it might be because Angel was only there because she was a 'diversity' hire. Angel can't help but cry at work. Her mental health rapidly declines; she becomes depressed and anxious at work, and her family doctor prescribes anti-depressants.



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ALLYSHIP

4.1.

A large organization in downtown Toronto has a Black youth-serving program in a satellite office in Scarborough with six Black youth workers. They often feel neglected, disconnected, and segregated; their non-Black manager is based at the downtown site. Despite a growing demand for their services, they have not seen any increase in resources, and they have extensive unpaid overtime hours. The organization recently received a \$35,000 grant to serve Black youth. The Black youth workers were initially excited by the possibility of more resources for their program's needs, but were dismayed to learn that the funding will instead be used to enhance another general program's ability to extend outreach to Black and racialized youth.



ALLYSHIP

4.2.

In June 2020, a youth-serving organization released a statement condemning anti-Black racism and the police murder of George Floyd. The organization then committed to several initiatives to tackle anti-Black racism. However, by January 2024, anti-Black racism is slowly disappearing from the organization's agenda. While a committed group of Black frontline staff consistently challenge the organization to consider anti-Black racism, this group is feeling exhausted. Many leaders are starting to disengage by cancelling or failing to attend team meetings.



ALLYSHIP

4.3.

Marsha self-identifies as Black and lesbian. She met with a youth who was referred for an intake assessment, and he asked her why she was wearing a rainbow wristband. He seemed irritated and then changed his mind about needing services. As he was leaving, and in the presence of other colleagues, he used derogatory and racist language to describe her and asked to be seen by a "true" Canadian. Another colleague quickly arranged another appointment for him with a cis white man. Marsha brought this to the program manager's attention, who insisted that the young person did not have to meet with her. The manager added, "We are in the business of client-centered care and not raising awareness around racism."



ALLYSHIP

4.4.

As Jessica, a Black teenager, settles into the after school program, a white peer yells out, "How do Black people keep their hair clean if they don't wash it every day like white folks?" Everyone in the youth group turns their heads to watch Jessica, who is mortified and does not know how to respond. Jessica remembers another incident when someone remarked that she looked 'professional' when she wore her hair long and straight instead of in braids. In both instances, nobody spoke up and she had no idea how to respond. She felt embarrassed for the rest of the program and stayed quiet so she wouldn't draw any attention.



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