



Using the Gifts of History to Promote Wellness

An essay by the [African American Behavioral Health Center of Excellence](#)

February 1, 2023

Every February, during Black History Month, we are reminded that most of us—regardless of color or culture—grew up with an incomplete view of American and European history. We were missing the perspectives of colonized peoples, enslaved Africans and their descendants, and the conquered original nations of this continent. When we lack these perspectives, we lack important information about powerful forces that have influenced the range of social, psychological, economic, and environmental circumstances—the social determinants of health—that have shaped the health and well-being of African Americans.

Why does this matter? It was philosopher George Santayana who warned us that forgetting the past would doom us to repeating it, and author William Faulkner who wrote that the past is not even past. In behavioral health, we see those words reflected every day in the lives of individuals, families, communities, organizations, and systems.

- From counterproductive behavior patterns to intergenerational trauma, when we are called upon to help people heal the present, we often end up face-to-face with a wounded past.
- When the people we serve summon up unexpected strengths, those strengths might reflect the resilient spirit born of their ancestors' struggles.
- And when we participate in community-level efforts to improve health and wellness for African Americans, we might meet the ghosts of earlier efforts, when authorities and “experts” failed to listen and missed opportunities to help transform history.

We need a perspective that can help us notice, understand, and address the many legacies of history. The African American Behavioral Health Center of Excellence has been developing a series of resources on: 1) history as it has affected the behavioral health of Black Americans and 2) ways in which we can use the gifts of history to promote health and wellness. Resources available for free download include the self-study and discussion guide, [Healing History: Where History Meets Behavioral Health Equity for African Americans](#), and the first two chapters of the [Healing History Web Page](#). Resources in the planning stages include the next two chapters of the Web Page, interactive web-based products, and a Healing History Learning Community.

It is important—but not enough—for our field to affirm the importance of Black history and seek inspiration from our favorite Black leaders, authors, and historical figures. Until we know the depth and breadth of the trauma Black people have endured for the past 400 years, we have no idea how powerful the obstacles to health, safety, and stability might be. And until we see the past, present, and future strength, beauty, and brilliance of African American individuals, families, communities, and cultures, we cannot imagine the abundance of resources ready to mobilize for the health, well-being, and success of these resilient, purpose-driven communities.