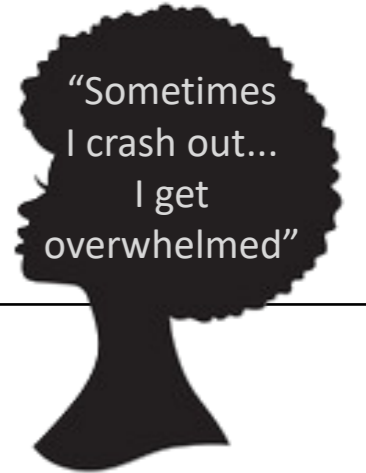


Exploring Black female university students' experience of mental health services

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Background

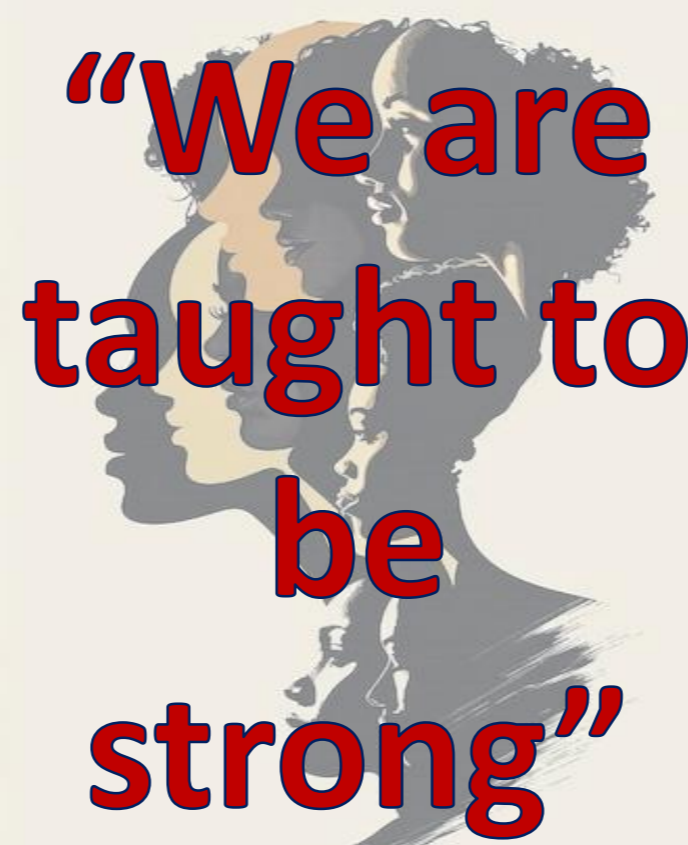
Student mental health is an increasing concern within higher education, particularly following COVID-19. Many students begin university already experiencing anxiety or depression, yet only a small proportion access university-based mental health services (King et al., 2024; Oti et al., 2025). For Black students, mental health and help-seeking may also be shaped by racism, underrepresentation, isolation, and cultural expectations (Stoll et al., 2022). For Black women specifically, expectations around strength, emotional control, and self-reliance may make it harder to express vulnerability or seek support (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; McDaniel et al., 2023). This study focused on Black female university students because their experiences are often overlooked in research on students or on Black students more broadly.

Method

Aim: To explore the lived experiences of Black female university students when accessing, or attempting to access, university-based mental health services.

Research focus: The study explored how participants made sense of support, what helped or limited engagement, and how identity, culture, and expectations of strength shaped their experiences.

Rationale: Existing research has explored student mental health and barriers to help-seeking, but there is less in-depth research focusing specifically on Black female students' experiences of university-based mental health support (Gulliver et al., 2010; Stoll et al., 2022).



Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore how participants made sense of their experiences.

3 Black female University of Staffordshire students who had accessed or attempted to access university-based mental health support.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams.

Transcripts were read and re-read. Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes were used to develop personal experiential themes, which were then analysed across participants to create six GETS.

Support can help, but it can also leave mixed feelings

Support is available, but not always enough

Other means of support can feel easier

Group Experiential Themes

Support can feel caring, but sometimes more like a process

Identity and culture can shape how support is experienced

It can be difficult to ask for help

Discussion

Access alone was not enough; participants could reach support but did not always feel meaningfully supported. This supports wider evidence that stigma, trust, emotional readiness and perceived relevance shape help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010; Clement et al., 2015).

Relational support mattered. Participants responded more positively when support felt personal, caring and emotionally responsive, reflecting Rogers' person-centred theory and research on the therapeutic alliance (Rogers, 1957; Horvath & Symonds, 1991).

Culturally informed support was important, but services should avoid assuming that all Black female students have the same experiences. This links with research on culturally adapted mental health support (Arundell et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023)

Conclusion

This study shows that university mental health support should be judged not only by whether students can access it, but also by how that support is experienced once they do. For the participants in this study, support was often available and helpful in the moment, but it was not always experienced as consistent, culturally relevant, or meaningful in the longer term. More personalised, relational, consistent, and culturally informed approaches may help university services better meet the needs of Black female students.

Key takeaway: Access is important, but meaningful support requires trust, cultural understanding, and continuity

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