UNDOCUBLACK™ GUIDE FOR MENTAL WELLNESS SPECIALISTS
INTRODUCTION

In the midst of our country’s political and moral crisis, our Black undocumented immigrant community is fighting each day to survive.

Our community is not only constantly erased from the conversation about immigration, but we are also the target of increased criminalization, deportation and enforcement because of who we are.

With our Black skin, racist and xenophobic policies and practices criminalize and discriminate against us. We collide with the criminal justice system constantly due to over-policing and the assumptions the system makes about us. Systemic discrimination and restricted access to resources throw up barriers to our advancement, especially as migrants who had been told the glories of making it in America. Without legal immigration status, we experience the oppression imposed in the name of national security. Hidden in plain sight, underestimated in our vulnerability and our risk for detention and deportation, we see our stories erased, and we disappear, unnoticed, into the deportation machine.

Because we are a community constantly in distress, resource development has been focused on necessary legal support and rapid response. However, a major need that has been placed on the back burner is the community’s mental health and wellness.

The mental wellness of our community is of the utmost importance, because it means our survival and our continued resistance. It is for this reason that we have launched our own Mental Wellness Initiative. The UndocuBlack™ Network’s work has stemmed from being experts about our own experiences, steeped in intention and reality, and centered on healing justice and our liberation.

The guide that follows is meant to be a tangible resource that Black undocumented folks can take to their mental health providers, to provide them with insight and guidance about our issues that they might not otherwise have. The guide is not exhaustive, but it aims to provide some basic direction and considerations for mental health providers to take into account when working together with Black undocumented community members who seek support and treatment, especially during a difficult time.

The survival of our community is political, and we do not shy away from that. But to continue our resistance, we must also work to heal. This is a first step in the many to come.
10 Things we hope you consider while caring for your Black undocumented clients
Create a safe and supportive space.

Creating a safe and supportive environment encourages your Black undocumented client to begin building a sense of trust and confidence to have these difficult and sensitive conversations. As a therapist, though in the helping profession, you are in a position of power. Additionally, within the Black undocumented community, there is a distrust of engaging with professionals for fear of being reported to immigration/law enforcement. Use the physical space around you to identify your support and allyship through posters, stickers, paintings, buttons, paper weights, etc. Continue to stress the agreements established for your sessions that are reflective of confidentiality, openness, safety, and security. Be clear in your statements of support.

Be Present With an Open Mind.

Within the Black community, there is a stigma around engaging in mental health services. In addition to feeling shame and pain about their inability to cope with their distress, some also expect that their experience with a therapist will be one of disconnect, receiving judgment, and being patronized. Ensure that you are fully present during the session and that you keep your mind open to the stories and feelings being shared with you. Be especially aware of how you are communicating, both verbally and nonverbally. Check in on your personal values, assumptions, and any conflicts that may impact your approach to caring for your client and the therapeutic relationship.
Educate yourself on the complexities of immigration as it relates to the African diaspora.

For someone who is undocumented and Black, seeking support for mental and emotional wellness is a major step. You should not expect that your Black undocumented client will be interested in educating you — or will even be in the head space to educate you — on the immigration system and the general issues the Black undocumented community faces. This person is here to talk with you about their situation, needs, and coping difficulties. Develop a basic understanding of the immigration system and its processes, relevant legislation, and local and state immigration-related policies that affect your client, the relationship between criminalization and immigration, and other relevant current events. Further on in this guide, you will find a reading list to act as a starting point for your research.

Discuss the availability of resources if the subject comes up, but do not assume that the person has not tried every avenue available so far.

It is important to be aware of and understand the available community resources that are relevant to and inclusive of Black immigrants. However, especially with respect to immigration legal support, it is important to avoid presuming that your Black undocumented client has not made attempts to take action to change their immigration status. As you will find in your research about the immigration system and processes, the system is complex, restrictive, and costly. Additionally, recognize that, while you may feel a need to help find a solution to this person’s problem, your role is to provide support where you can and to collaborate with appropriate professionals and resources when available and/or necessary.

"Develop a basic understanding of the immigration system and its processes."
Terminology, such as “illegal alien” and “illegal immigrant,” is dehumanizing in nature. When it is absolutely necessary to refer to immigration status, “undocumented immigrant” is the more appropriate, less stigmatizing term to use. Avoid reacting to your client’s story with phrases such as “I didn’t know you are undocumented” or “You don’t look undocumented.” For Black undocumented immigrants, such phrases are illustrative and exacerbate their experience of having been basically excluded or erased from the general conversation about immigration and immigrants’ rights. Get comfortable with hearing and using the words “Black,” “Afro-Latinx,” “Afro-Caribbean,” “African.” Shying away from these terms further perpetuates negativity about Blackness, which can create a rift in the therapeutic relationship. Refrain from further perpetuating the narrative of “good immigrant vs. bad immigrant” in expressing support for your client (e.g., “But you’re a good person. You only want to contribute to this country as an upstanding citizen”; or “You have never been in any trouble. You are not a criminal”; or “It’s not your fault, it’s your parents’.”) This rhetoric is steeped in anti-Blackness. Lastly, unless your Black undocumented client brings up current events, avoid asking them their opinion on recent news and things you may have heard, as this can be triggering.
Understand that for a Black undocumented immigrant, there is no way to make a clear distinction between the issues that arise from being Black and those that arise from being undocumented.

It is tempting to put issues affecting Black people and issues affecting undocumented immigrants into two separate categories. It is upon you to remain conscious that a Black undocumented immigrant is unable to separate these two concerns. The UndocuBlack™ Network community recognizes fully that our Black lives matter while also fighting for change in the immigration system. Black undocumented community members are doubly vulnerable — to racist and xenophobic policies and practices that criminalize and discriminate against Black skin and to the policies and practices targeting and oppressing undocumented immigrants. This also applies to our intersecting identities as women, queer, trans, working class, and others.

It’s our story to tell, but not yours to demand.

It’s understandable that you as a clinician would want to know more about your Black undocumented client. Understanding your client helps you in developing rapport and the treatment process. You may be interested in knowing where your client is from, if they remember their home country, what it was like growing up undocumented. The story of one’s migration and adjustment belongs to your client — which means the time in which they share their story is also theirs. Storytelling can be exhausting and re-traumatizing in and of itself — many have experienced physical, mental, and emotional traumas and pain before, during, and after their migration. Whether it is to satisfy your curiosity or fascination, or it is to make progress with the best of intentions, asking a person to share their story before they are ready is detrimental to this person’s wellness and to the therapeutic relationship.
While coping with being Black and undocumented is an issue of concern, it is inaccurate to assume that it is the only problem your client is coping with.

Being Black and undocumented may or may not be the main issue causing your client’s distress. Your clients may also be coping with how to get their basic needs met, not having access to healthcare, a family member in failing health, sexuality and relationships, gender identity and expression, disabilities and/or changes in their abilities, their religious and cultural identities, being exploited or threatened, past or current traumas, etc. Obtaining legal status may be only one part of your Black undocumented client’s concern, but also recognize that the lack of legal status severely impacts the other issues they are dealing with. Black immigrants who have transitioned to a new immigration status may still be in danger of being detained and deported, depending on their status. Lastly, a change in legal immigration status does not remove the traumas and experiences associated with having been undocumented.

That said, being Black and undocumented may not be the factor precipitating a mental health issue or concern, but it plays a major role in a person’s mental wellness. In addition to impacting access to resources, being in this position impacts decisions, the ability to use positive coping mechanisms, and survival. Assuming and maintaining that the person’s race and immigration status have no relevance to their mental wellness will stagnate the therapeutic relationship and delay the person’s progress to wellness.
Black undocumented community members have developed resilience as they fight through experiences of racism, discrimination, oppression, xenophobia, physical and/or psychological violence, and aggression on a daily basis. However, it is important to allow your client to be vulnerable and give them space to feel, speak, express, and take up space. Black people are often seen as unnerved, strong, and unaffected. They often have to prove that they are hurting or experiencing pain, and are not given the space to experience their vulnerability without being taken advantage of or admonished. It is again of utmost importance to create a safe space to allow them to be vulnerable.

Respect the resilience, but acknowledge the vulnerability.

Consider Donating Pro-Bono Sessions.

Many Black undocumented community members experience hardship in accessing healthcare. Consider donating your time to support the Black undocumented community in accessing mental health services. Talk with your colleagues in the mental health and medical fields about creating safe spaces, and encourage them to donate their time. Reach out to Gabrielle Jackson (gabrielle@undocublack.org) of the UndocuBlack™ Network if you are interested in pursuing this form of support.
Immigration policy, law, reform: How does it work, what is it all about, and why does it really matter?

• Learn about how the immigration system works and how there really is no “line” for undocumented immigrants to join to gain legal status.

• What is the difference between DACA, permanent residency, and citizenship?

• Learn the difference between lawful presence and lawful status.

• Learn about other relevant legislation, such as: the DREAM Act (and its common misconceptions); executive actions such as DAPA and DACA+ (and their failure to become reality); and NAFTA (and how it is one example of how U.S. policies affect migration)

• Read about one man’s difficult journey with the Diversity Visa program, a program that offers migration opportunities to many of the African Diaspora. Known as the “green card lottery,” even the most recent comprehensive immigration reform proposals have tried to terminate this program.

• The travel ban on Muslims disproportionately affects Black immigrants. While the public made assumptions, the Trump administration knew what it was doing.

• It is often assumed that the proposal to build a “wall” on and further militarize the U.S.-Mexico border does not affect Black migration, but it does — for Afro-Caribbean, African, and Afro-Latinx peoples. This video, “Life Between Borders: Black migrants in Mexico,” also offers insight on the issue.

• What’s next? African immigrants fear what is to come in the aftermath of the newest immigration bans.

• Check out Mijente’s What Makes A City A Sanctuary Now report detailing the threats and policy solutions facing immigrants today.
• Why should Black people care about immigration issues? — In the words of a Black immigration attorney in Washington DC.

• Undocumented immigrants are not just in the Latinx community: How the current discourse on immigration has created unnecessary tension between Black and Brown people.

The truth behind deportations: Racism, xenophobia, and mass criminalization.

• Check out the Black Alliance for Just Immigration’s “State of Black Immigrants” report, which includes a statistical look and an analysis of Black immigrants in the mass criminalization system.

• Tanya Golash-Boza’s report also explores the parallels between mass incarceration and mass deportations.

• The confluence of the War on Crime, the War on Immigrants, and the War on Terror puts Black immigrants, particularly Black undocumented immigrants, at extreme risk. Learn about The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, both signed in 1996 by former President Bill Clinton, and about the effort to #Fix96.

• Deportations within the Black community are not a new phenomenon and continues to be hidden from mass media coverage over and over and over and over and over again.

• Read about how being deported as a Legal Permanent Resident with a “green card” isn’t so out of the norm and how the deportations are often related to inflated charges for minor crimes.

• Learn about how immigrants requesting asylum are actually detained upon asking for it and then deported, even though they have passed their credible fear interviews.
The psychology of it all.

- DACA, the best known executive action benefiting immigrants taken by the Obama administration, does not undo or stop the exposure to mental and physical trauma experienced by its recipients.

- Read about how the fear of deportation has resulted in women dropping charges against their domestic abusers, a warranted reaction after a trans woman was recently detained by ICE at a courthouse after being approved for a restraining order against her abuser.

- What is “toxic stress?” Read more about the toxic physical and emotional detrimental experienced when a person is in constant fear of deportation.

- Check out the Migration Policy Institute’s report on how deportations of parents have long-lasting harmful effects on their children.

- How living in fear of deportation is “terrible for your health” and how that fear puts stress on families.

- Here is a 2013 report from the Inter-American Human Rights Court on the psychosocial impact of U.S. immigration policies, detention, and deportation on immigrant children and families.

The voices of Black undocumented people: Here, existing.

- The words of an UndocuBlack™ Network member on the Black and undocumented experience and why immigration reform is not only a Latinx issue.

- A story from another of our members being Black and undocumented: “I didn’t know anybody else like me.”

- “I am here representing everyone who looks like me”: The words of a Black undocumented person in April 2016 while the Supreme Court was hearing United States v. Texas, a case about the Obama administration’s executive actions intended to make deferred action available to more undocumented people.

- An undocumented Black person shares their words on being a Black undocumented organizer, the “good immigrant” narrative, how the fight for immigration justice is also a racial justice fight, and the importance of self-care.

- Things that undocumented people worry about that U.S. citizens don’t: One Black undocumented person’s thoughts as expressed to the mainstream American world.
• An UndocuBlack™ Network member shares her story and her thoughts in response to the rescission of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (radio interview).

• “If I don’t tell my story, someone else will”: Three Black undocumented people speak honestly about the realities of Black undocumented immigrants.

• Centering Black undocumented voices in the DACA discussion: Check out this podcast where UndocuBlack™ Network members speak up and out.

• UndocuBlack™ Network members share why they continue to speak out and fight as Black undocumented immigrants are detained and deported at disproportionate rates.

• For more regular readings from the voices of Black Undocumented people, check out the UndocuBlack™ Blog.

What can you do?

• Here are actionable steps on how to be a better ally to undocumented immigrants.
We are in a time of resistance. Many are resisting by taking to the streets. Others are resisting by surviving and making it through each day. This is why it is ever so important to recognize that the mental wellness of our community is of the utmost significance — our resistance and survival depend on it.

The UndocuBlack™ Network is working to uplift stories of Black undocumented people and to facilitate access to resources in our community. If you or someone you know is interested in supporting us to ensure our efforts to facilitate mental wellness resources are successful, please contact us at info@undocublack.org.
The UndocuBlack™ Network is a multigenerational network of currently and formerly undocumented Black people that fosters community, facilitates access resources and contributes to transforming the realities of our people, so we are thriving and living our fullest lives.

We do this by:

1. Developing the leadership of our members through tools, trainings, and programming.

2. Building power with and for our communities through advocacy, local organizing and building strategic alliances to advance policies that affect our daily lives.

3. Centering the humanity, dignity and well-being of our communities in all aspects of our work.

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