



COMMENT



Academic ethics of mental health: the national black postdocs framework for the addressment of support for undergraduate and graduate trainees

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INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have resulted in a greater appreciation of how lifestyle changes impact minority mental and biological health [1–3]. In the last 5 years, awareness of mental health issues among minorities in academia has been highlighted due to the political and national climate surrounding racial injustices [4, 5]. However, the periodic attention directed towards mental health problems in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) trainees lack sustainability, often centering around tragic losses within the scientific community. To effectively tackle these challenges, it is crucial to develop proactive solutions rather than relying solely on reactive measures.

Rationale for the emergency support program

Pursuing higher education and a career as an academic researcher exposes minorities to microaggressions and the burden of additional responsibilities of advocating for underrepresented populations [6–9]. These stresses contribute to compromised mental health [6–9]. Unsurprisingly, these additional burdens increase chronic stress, anxiety, and depression among minority trainees, exacerbating mental health challenges and even physiological changes [1, 10]. These mental health challenges and the loss of 2 Black trainees within the early months of 2023 sparked the National Black Postdoctoral Association (NBPA) to launch the Emergency Support Program (ESP) (Fig. 1).

Launching the emergency support program

As of August 2023, the NBPA ESP brings together 61 volunteered mentors to assist with psychosocial contextual events that trainees are experiencing. The NBPA ESP aims to assist trainees in overcoming challenges related to their work and personal environments that could prohibit their training and career progression.

The NBPA framework to addressing mental health challenges

The NBPA Emergency Support Program (ESP) had several stages of development that can be adopted by others.

1. Initiative leader: Dr. FDH nominated Dr. CAH as the NBPA ESP lead.
2. Volunteer recruitment to guide multilevel support. <https://forms.gle/NWjuseRaYkUNnCaB8>.
3. Dr. CAH and ALBN created the NBPA Mental Health Manual.
4. Updated NBPA website with resources: <https://www.nationalblackpostdoc.com/resources>.
5. Created a line of support to match trainees with volunteers. <https://forms.gle/thMurEZA2SV5QYU8>.
6. Organize a volunteer town hall for mental health manual training: <https://tinyurl.com/32cmd5dn>.
7. Launch program (June 2023) via @natblackpostdoc Twitter posts, with Black in X groups, and with the Society for Black Trainees in STEM and NBPA members.

The goal of the framework is to provide a pathway to support trainees year-round. Trainees are able to directly request support using the designated form and be matched with one or more of the volunteers by the ESP chair.

Critical elements of program evaluation

1) The primary measurement of success has been qualitative notes of the benefits of the program. One postdoctoral scholar stated, “I received support and understanding during the meetings. I follow up with mentors and even share some of the positive things that have happened. The support has been wonderful.” 2) A second measure of evaluation is maintaining the program which will be done by 1) sending reminders for all ‘Black in X’ organizations and 2) publicizing the program via Twitter/X monthly. Additionally, other scholars who have benefitted from the program (Dr. KNH) speak openly at talks or public discussions about ESP. 3) Thirdly, we will generate evaluations of the impact of the ESP via surveys. The survey will request responses for demographic information, initial contact/accessibility, interaction with assigned volunteer, impact on crisis management, program satisfaction, and methods to better the program. The mixed-method approach (Likert scale questions (e.g., rating satisfaction from 1 to 5), multiple-choice

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THE ROAD TO MENTAL HEALTH EQUITY FOR BLACK TRAINEES



Fig. 1 The road map to mental health equity for Black trainees used to establish the National Black Postdocs Association Emergency Support Program. QR codes are linked to relevant resources for the NBPA ESP including volunteer recruitment (Step1/blue), mental health manual (Step 2/green), updated NBPA website (Step 3/orange), trainees can request support and be matched with a volunteer (Step 4/yellow). Abbreviation: NBPA National Black Postdocs Association; ESP Emergency Support Program.

questions, and open-ended questions) will yield quantitative data for analysis of trends and qualitative data for understanding the participants' experiences.

Challenges of program implementation

The first challenge is increasing awareness of the program. We offset this challenge by connecting with 'Black in X' organizations and using our Twitter/X platform to continuously publicize that the program is active. Another challenge is for the volunteers who have a heavy burden of listening and aiding trainees. To combat this mentally taxing service, the NBPA ESP will offer a virtual meeting as a mental release for volunteers. Thirdly, the challenge remains in how to bridge the gap between available resources at institutions with the ESP. Due to the volunteers representing over 50 institutions and trainees who request support can be from any

institution, overcoming this challenge will be a case-by-case return. In theory, the matched volunteer will assist the receiver of assistance with available resources at their institution using their Stanley Brown plan provided in the mental health manual. Lastly, another challenge is sustainability which will be combatted through the annual formal election process of a chair of the ESP through NBPA.

Limitations and strengths of ESP

A notable limitation of the program is that it does not establish a line of support directly at the institution or department for the trainee receiving assistance. A second limitation is that the volunteers are not licensed mental health providers which we emphasize in program advertisement. A notable strength is that the ESP provides a supportive network and trainees can be

matched with several volunteers. The program naturally broadens trainees' networks which is crucial for careers in and beyond academia, and it serves as an independent measure of support.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While some environments and allies contribute to fostering supportive spaces for minorities, there remains a significant gap in resources and training for senior leaders concerning mental health. The establishment and launch of the NBPA ESP equipped us to deal with issues for trainees struggling with personal mental health difficulties (e.g. anxiety and depression). Future directions of the ESP included creating workshops on advising mental health professionals by a licensed psychologist/therapist and fostering collaborations with institutions to employ similar local lines of support. By investing in the mental health and well-being of minority scholars, academia can harness the full potential of diverse perspectives, foster innovation and excellence, and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable future. The NBPA ESP team hopes that publicly unveiling the program will provide a unique set of sorely needed resources, while ultimately serving to preserve the nonrenewable resource we are losing in academia, Black scientists.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

C.A.H.: Chair of ESP, envisioned complete pipeline to be implemented (mental health manual and support request), prepared original draft of manuscript, prepared original draft of figure, manuscript revisions, submitting manuscript to NPP Special Projects Team and journal correspondence; A.L.B.: Assistance in creating mental health manual, creating figure for manuscript, manuscript revisions; T.T.: Creating online portal for program, manuscript revisions/approval; K.N.H.: Advice on streamlining support request, manuscript revisions/approval; F.D.H.: Conceived of the ESP initiative, nominated CAH as ESP chair position, and developed and publicized the initial mentor registration sign-up survey.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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