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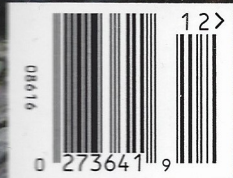
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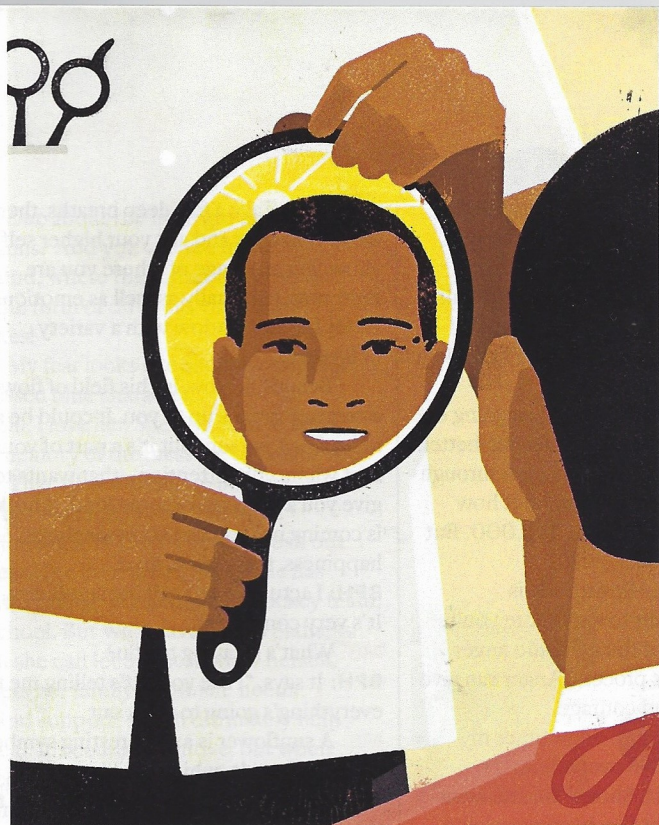
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DECEMBER 2020 \$4.99



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HEALTH HERO

Talking Shop

Thanks to this nonprofit, Black men are leaving the barbershop with a fresh look—and outlook.

BY SHANNON SHELTON MILLER

AS CLIPPERS BUZZED by his ears, Tyreese Boren, 19, began to talk. He was depressed about not being able to communicate his feelings to his girlfriend, a factor in the couple's recent breakup. His barber, Ray Conner, 37, stayed quiet as Boren told his story, then encouraged the young man to acknowledge and express his suffering: "It's okay to say, 'I need this time to cry; I need this time to heal,'" Conner assured him.

Conner may not be a therapist, but as a longtime barber, there isn't much he hasn't heard as a de facto counselor to the men who stop by his shop in Johnson City, Tennessee, for a haircut. And now he's helping ease their minds in a more formal capacity with the Confess Project, an organization providing mental health assistance to Black men and their families through barbershop conversations.

The Arkansas-based nonprofit, which Conner learned about from his own barber, was founded by Lorenzo Lewis, 32, in 2016. Lewis

recognized that many of the Black boys he encountered as a youth care worker at a juvenile detention center had untreated psychological issues rooted in trauma. His goal: to partner with local leaders and healthcare professionals in order to make mental health services more accessible to boys and men of color in underserved communities.

Initially, Lewis, who grappled with depression and anger issues in his youth, organized support groups at churches and libraries. But when hardly anyone showed up, he shifted his focus to a venue where he knew men and boys would feel comfortable talking. "Most Black men get their first haircut as babies and may go to the same barber for 20 years," Lewis says. "We grow up thinking about the barbershop as a space where men talk openly about their lives, and in many cases, it's the only place we have—besides, for some, the church—that promotes emotional growth."

Since 2018, the Confess Project

has recruited 160 barbers in 14 U.S. cities to become mental health advocates. The men receive in-person and online training in counseling skills, including active listening. They're also taught to refer men with more serious concerns to a network of counselors and therapists.

Lewis's organization is addressing a significant mental healthcare gap in Black communities. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reports that only about 30 percent of African Americans received any kind of mental health treatment in 2018, compared with 42 percent for the overall population—despite Black adults being more likely than their white counterparts to report persistent symptoms of emotional distress. Research shows that socioeconomic inequities, the stigma that can come with seeking help, and a dearth of Black and culturally competent providers are among the main barriers to treatment. And gender disparities may compound these issues for Black men, who get psychological help half as often as Black women and are four times more likely to die by suicide, according to HHS.

In 2020, these mental health issues have only grown worse, as Black communities grapple with the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Americans of color, along with a heightening of generations-long unrest over police brutality, magnified by the killing of George Floyd and others. Data from a June 2020 Census Bureau survey shows that a week after the video of Floyd's killing went public, African Americans reported higher rates of anxiety and depression than any other racial or ethnic group, with 41 percent of those surveyed screening positive for either or both conditions.

This mental health crisis is why Lewis and his team are working to find and train more advocates like Conner. He referred Boren to a licensed therapist, who taught the young man communication skills that allowed him to rebuild his relationship with his girlfriend, who's now pregnant, and connect with his father, who recently reentered Boren's life after leaving when he was 2. Conner has supported dozens of other clients in struggles ranging from stress to suicidal thoughts. "The Confess Project is helping Black men understand that vulnerability isn't a weakness," he says. "It's a strength that can build healthier communities."



There's a big difference when you confide in someone who's probably been in the same shoes and knows where you're coming from.

—TYREESE BOREN