

# BLACK, GAY, CHURCH, AND MY MENTAL HEALTH

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This lesson provides psycho-emotional coping strategies for Black gay men who have experienced discrimination, violence, and internalized homophobia through their experiences with the Black church. This lesson utilizes interactive activities to help participants understand the skills that are available to them during periods of depression and/or anxiety.

## KEYWORDS

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Body Image  
Coming Out  
Community  
Bias  
Emotions  
Homophobia  
Mental Health  
Religion  
Sexual Orientation  
Stigma  
Stress Management  
Trauma

## THEME

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Society &  
Culture

## FORMAT

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Interactive  
Discussion

## TIME

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80 minutes





# PREPARATION

PREPARATION

The facilitator(s) should use this section to prepare for the lesson.

## WHY THIS LESSON IS IMPORTANT FOR BLACK MEN

Spirituality and community gained through attending church has been essential to the lives of many Black gay men (Harris, 2006). However, for many, inclusion has come at a great cost, causing depression and anxiety. Experiences of stigmatization and discrimination have been found to lead to greater incidence of depressive distress and anxiety (David & Knight, 2008). There is also a significant correlation between these mental health issues and high-risk sexual behavior in Black gay men (Hatzenbuehler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008).

### GOAL

Participants will experience reduced anxiety and depression through the applying of effective psycho-emotional coping strategies.

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Identify the two primary categories of mental health disorders that impact Black gay men.
- List at least three issues experienced by Black gay men that attend Black churches.
- Name and describe at least four coping strategies for dealing with anxiety and depression.

### TIME

<b>STEPS 1–5</b>	Introductions and Opening Activity	10 min.
<b>STEPS 6–8</b>	Term Teaching Activity	20 min.
<b>STEPS 9–12</b>	Video Discussion: “Holler if You Hear Me”	20 min.
<b>STEPS 13–15</b>	Large Group Discussion: “How We Cope”	20 min.
<b>STEPS 16–18</b>	Closing Activity	10 min.

## REQUIRED BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR EDUCATORS

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The ideal facilitator for this activity is trained in an area of mental health counseling, particularly someone who can effectively address unanticipated emotional discomfort among participants without derailing the lesson itself. Because this is not a group therapy session, facilitators should be prepared to direct participants to alternate local mental health resources in the event that discomfort occurs.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

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The themes and topics in this lesson can be very heavy to process, including for those leading the session. It is strongly encouraged that all facilitators become familiar with the topic and lesson content, processing any emotions that may emerge prior to facilitating the discussion for anyone else.

## KEY TERMS

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**Anxiety Disorders:** A group of mental disorders characterized by feelings of anxiety and fear.<sup>1</sup>

**Depressive Disorder:** An illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts. It can sometimes interfere with daily life and normal functioning.<sup>1</sup>

**Discrimination:** Treatment or consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit, partiality or prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

**Homophobia:** Irrational fear of, aversion to, or discriminations against homosexuality or homosexuals.<sup>2</sup>

**Internalized Homophobia:** An involuntary belief by lesbians and gay men that the homophobic lies, stereotypes and myths about them are true.<sup>3</sup>

**Racism:** poor treatment of or violence against people because of their race.<sup>2</sup>

**Stigma:** a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.<sup>2</sup>

Sources:

1. *The American Psychological Association, 2012.*
2. *The American Heritage College Dictionary, 2012.*
3. *The Body, 2008.*

## FACILITATION PREP

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The facilitator(s) should complete the following tasks before the lesson starts:

- ❑ This lesson includes significant discussion of Key Terms that may not be familiar to participants. If possible, consider using Microsoft PowerPoint or other presentation software to draft and display slides of each of each term as it is being discussed. *(If you decide to use this method, be sure your space has proper equipment—projector and screen—for comfortable viewing.)*
- ❑ This lesson includes discussion of the video “Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church (Part 4),” which can be found at [youtube.com/watch?v=vIS5nU34](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIS5nU34). Check your space 30 minutes in advance to ensure that an Internet connection is available, and that the video can be seen and heard properly. Cue the film at the 1:30 mark and minimize the window until the appropriate time during the lesson.
- ❑ If your space will allow, please arrange all seating in a circular pattern, keeping seats open for facilitator(s) to sit with the group during discussion.
- ❑ Write the name of each of this lesson’s Key Terms on an individual index card. Keep the cards hidden until the proper time for distribution during the lesson.
- ❑ If you are able, play some form of relaxing music (e.g., ambient sounds, neo-soul) for participants as they arrive.

## MATERIALS

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The facilitator(s) should have the following materials for the lesson:

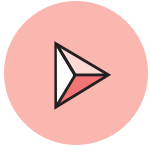
- ❑ Flip chart paper
- ❑ 8–10 markers *(any color)*
- ❑ Lined paper *(2–3 sheets for each participant)*
- ❑ Writing utensils *(one for each participant)*
- ❑ “Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church (Part 4)” video
- ❑ Computer
- ❑ LCD projector, screen, and connector cables
- ❑ Speakers

## HANDOUTS

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Each participant should be provided with the following printed materials:

- ❑ H1, “Coping Strategies Inventory”
- ❑ End-of-Session Evaluation



# PROCEDURE

The facilitator(s) should follow the steps in this section to facilitate the session, and use the margin for notes and prompts.



## Introductions and Opening Activity

### STEP 1

Welcome participants to your session and conduct brief introductions (name, pronouns) with the group as needed. Take an emotional temperature of the group by engaging in the following question prompts:

- “How are you feeling about being with this group today?”
- “What were you thinking about or feeling coming to group?”

Make a written list or mental note of feelings and thoughts that appear to be repeated across the group. (*You can refer to them as needed later on in the session.*)

### STEP 2

Thank everyone for checking in, and then review all established group agreements, reaffirming consent from the group. If group agreements have not been completed, please create them at this time (*use the Community Agreements lesson, if necessary*).

### STEP 3

Post a sheet of flip chart paper, and then instruct participants to take 30 seconds to quietly consider the following question:

- “When you think about ‘The Black Church’, what comes to mind?”

After the 30 second period has passed, invite participants to share their answers, and record them on the sheet.

### STEP 4

Once all responses have been recorded, ask participants the following question:

- “What relationship do you think these answers have to mental health?”

Allow as many participants who wish to speak the chance to respond. If no responses are given, invite participants to consider if various items on the list could help aggravate and/or alleviate mental health challenges.

**STEP 5**

**Conclude** by explaining to participants that the remainder of their time together will be spent discussing some of the joys and challenges of being Black and gay in the church. **Explain** that while you make no assumptions about how people experience religion and/or church experiences, you wish to establish that, for some people, church experiences can be a great source of anxiety. **Explain** that this session will provide strategies for addressing that, and that by the end of the session each individual present will be given resources they may be able to use when they leave.

**Term Teaching Activity****STEP 6**

**Break up** the larger group into smaller groups of 2–3 individuals. (*If your group is smaller than 7 people, allow each participant to work alone.*) **Distribute** one index card from the list of cards prepared prior to the session. (*See Facilitation Prep.*)

**Explain** to participants that they will now be responsible for leading a mini-discussion with the larger group about the term noted on their card. **Instruct** the group that they should be prepared to discuss the following questions about their term:

- What is the term?
- What does it mean, or what do you believe it means?
- What does/might it have to do with Black Gay men in church?
- What additional questions and/or concerns does it raise for you?

**STEP 7**

**Give** participants 3–5 minutes to complete the activity, and then 3–5 minutes each to report out to the larger group. Once all groups have reported, **begin** reviewing the terms again, providing official definitions as outlined in the Key Terms section of this lesson.

**STEP 8**

**Invite** participants to share any thoughts they have about the official terms, and **note** any discrepancies that may exist between the terms and participants' own definitions. **Address** any remaining questions or concerns participants have about the terms, and then move on.



## Video Discussion: “Holler If You Hear Me”

### STEP 9

Distribute 2–3 sheets of paper and a writing utensil to each participant. Explain that you will now be watching a video that highlights stories from Black gay men who deal or have dealt with mental health issues in the past. Explain to participants that the video does contain sensitive material, including discussions of child abuse and suicide. For those who are interested, offer participants the option to leave the session while the video is playing, and then return for discussion once the lesson has concluded. Finally, instruct participants to take notes as they watch, keeping track of anything that is said in the video that they can relate to their personal lived experience. Make sure that all participants can see the area where the video will be shown.

### STEP 10



Play the video, “Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church (Part 4).” After the video has concluded, take a pulse of the room by asking if anyone has any immediate feelings they would like to release in the moment. *(Be sure to focus on feelings in this discussion, letting participants know that they will be able to discuss their thoughts shortly.)*

After all feelings have been shared, instruct participants to write down any final thoughts that come to mind about what they’ve seen and what it makes them think of. *(If you have participants who do not wish to write their thoughts down you can allow that, so long as they remain quiet while thinking, so as not to distract others.)*

### STEP 11

After 2–3 minutes, instruct participants to partner with someone next to them, and review any thoughts and reactions they considered and feel comfortable sharing. Give pairs 3–5 minutes to talk. *(Walk among the groups while participants talk to monitor progress and serve as a resource if they have specific questions.)*

#### *Alternate Activity:*

If you have a large group (20+), consider adding a second 3–5-minute round where pairs speak to other pairs before reconvening the large group. Instruct each group of four to select a spokesperson for the large group discussion.

**STEP 12**

After time has elapsed on the smaller conversations, reconvene the larger group, and then proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “What was it like discussing the video? Were there any consistent themes or topics that you all talked about?”
2. “Just thinking about the video and your conversations, what would you say is the overall emotional toll of being part of a religious community as a Black gay man?”
3. “Are there ever any benefits of being part of a religious community as a Black gay man, or situations where the benefits can outweigh the challenges?” *(Because some participants may have church experiences that are healthy and positive, remind participants that the challenges raised should not be assumed to be universal.)*
4. “Is there an emotional toll related to dealing with homophobia as a Black gay man? What about discrimination? Internalized homophobia?”
5. “Why is it important to discuss mental health within the context of being Black gay men? Are there any benefits to bringing up the issue, and if so, what are they?”
6. “Now that all of this has been discussed, what do you believe Black gay men can do to lessen the effects of these issues on their mental health?”

**STEP 13****Group Discussion: “How We Cope”**

Post a new sheet of newsprint to the wall. Explain to participants that, in an ideal world, none of the issues that have been discussed would be the reality Black gay men face. Explain to participants that, in the meantime, there are strategies that can be used to cope with the effects of these adverse experiences.

**STEP 14**

Ask participants if they have used any particular coping strategies to get through difficult times, and then invite individuals to share examples as they wish. Write down participants’ responses onto a sheet of flip chart paper.



**STEP 15**

Distribute copies of Handout H1, “Coping Strategies Inventory”. Instruct participants to take a few minutes to complete the sheet. After 3–5 minutes, reconvene the group and review the following Discussion Questions:

1. “What do you think of these coping strategies? Are there any that match the list you all came up with? Are there any that aren’t on the list, but you’ve tried them before? If so, how did that work for you?” (*Invite participants to share examples.*)
2. “Are there any that stand out to you, or one’s that you hadn’t thought about before?” (*Invite participants to share examples.*)
3. “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being ‘Very Difficult’, and 10 being ‘Very Easy’, how easy do you think it would be to incorporate these strategies into your regular life? Are there some that would be easier or more difficult than others? If so, why, and what might be a good way to lessen the difficulties?”
4. “What do you think would be the long-term benefit of incorporating one of these strategies into your life on a regular basis? What about 2? 3? 5 or more?”

*Alternate Activity:*

You may have individuals in your group who have challenges with reading and writing. As an alternative, distribute one sheet each of red, yellow, and blue paper to each participant. Read each coping skill out loud from the handout, and instruct participants to rate the skill according to the following rating system:

- **Blue** = “I have heard of this coping strategy, and I like it/use it.”
- **Yellow** = “I have not heard of this coping strategy”, or “I have heard of the skill, but have not tried it yet, or am not sure of how I feel about it.”
- **Red** = “I have tried this coping skill, and I do not like it.”

Once all statements have been read, proceed through the Discussion Questions as normal, beginning with question #2.



## Closing Activity

### STEP 16

Close out the session by thanking participants for their time and attentiveness. Distribute a copy of the End-of-Session Evaluation to each participant. Allow participants 5–7 minutes to complete the evaluation, and collect them as they are completed. After five minutes, invite any participants who have not completed the evaluation to do so after the next activity.

### STEP 17

If you recorded any emotional themes presented by the group at the beginning of the session, revisit the list and check in with participants to gauge how they are currently feeling. Address any remaining concerns or questions they may have, as you are able.

### STEP 18

Beginning with a volunteer, invite participants to share one lesson they will be taking with them as a result of this lesson. Encourage subsequent participants to avoid repeating what others have shared as they respond. Once all participants have responded, thank participants again for their participation, and then adjourn the session.



# HANDOUT

## COPING STRATEGIES INVENTORY

**Directions:**

Please use the facilitator’s instructions to complete the sections below.

	Know It, Like It/Use It	Don't Know It/ Haven't Used It	Tried It, Don't Like It
1. Taking a time out			
2. Exercising at least 30 min. daily			
3. Practicing deep breathing			
4. Counting backwards from 20			
5. Listening to inspiring music			
6. Meditating			
7. Practicing yoga			
8. Getting body work (e.g., massages, acupuncture, chiropractic)			
9. Practicing art (e.g., clay, painting, coloring)			
10. Watching a comedy show or funny internet video			
11. Journaling			
12. Cooking a great meal			
13. Making loud noises (e.g., crying, screaming, singing)			
14. Seeing a therapist			
15. Talking with a trusted friend			
16. Praying			
17. Cuddle dates			
18. Other:			
19. Other:			
20. Other:			