

WHY MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS TO ME

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My name is Areyonna Adavia Tompkins, and I am a Youth Peer Specialist with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). I hold a master's degree in social and behavioral science from Temple University, where I focused my academic and professional efforts on mental health advocacy, research, and the development of supportive resources for young people. Mental health is deeply personal to me. I'm not only an advocate but I'm also someone with lived experience. As a person with ADHD, I've navigated the complexities of neurodivergence in academic, social, and professional settings. I know firsthand how challenging it can be to feel misunderstood or unsupported in systems that aren't built with neurodiversity in mind. That's why I'm committed to helping create spaces that are inclusive, affirming, and truly accessible for all.

During my academic studies, I developed a selected compendium of novel mental health services implemented at colleges and universities across the nation. I also recently completed research exploring Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) among undergraduate students at three universities in Philadelphia, focusing on the effectiveness of on-campus mental health resources, barriers to utilization, and how intersecting identities, including neurodivergence, affect access to care.

At its core, inclusion is about more than just making space—it's about reshaping systems to be better for everyone. By equipping dental professionals with the tools and training needed to better understand and serve patients, we can help create a healthcare environment where no one is left behind.

Why I'm Passionate About the Autism Community

My passion for supporting the autism community comes from both a place of professional commitment and personal solidarity. As someone who is neurodivergent myself, I deeply respect and relate to the experiences of those on the spectrum. I know how powerful it is to feel seen, heard, and valued in spaces that too often overlook or exclude difference. In my role, I work to uplift autistic voices and help build systems of support that reflect the true diversity of human minds.

What I Want People to Know About ASD and Autism Awareness/Acceptance

Autism is not a puzzle to be solved - it's a part of the beautifully complex landscape of human experience. Awareness is important, but acceptance is transformative. It means recognizing that autistic people don't need to be "fixed" or "normalized" - they need to be understood, respected, and supported on their own terms. Every person with ASD has unique strengths and perspectives that enrich our communities, and it's time our systems and attitudes reflect that.

The Changes I Hope to See

I envision a world where neurodivergent individuals - whether autistic, ADHD, or otherwise - are not just accommodated, but celebrated. This includes increasing neurodiversity in leadership, ensuring accessibility in education and the workplace, and building mental health resources that are informed by lived experiences. I also want to see more intersectional approaches in autism awareness that recognize how race, gender, and class shape the experiences of autistic individuals, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds.

A Memorable Experience Within the Community

One of my most memorable moments was during a youth-led mental health workshop where neurodivergent and neurotypical peers came together to connect, share stories, and support one another. The authenticity, empathy, and mutual respect in that room was incredibly moving. It reminded me of the power of peer support and the importance of spaces where all identities and ways of being are honored.

Final Thoughts

Mental health advocacy isn't just my career - it's my calling. As a neurodivergent professional and person with lived experience, I'm proud to be part of a movement that seeks not only awareness, but true acceptance. When we prioritize inclusivity and empower all voices, we build a future where everyone, regardless of how their brain works, can thrive!

