



Transcript

A Soft Landing For Young Folks of Color feat. Dr. Alfiee Breland -Noble

Publishing Date: Nov 20, 2023

[00:00:00] **Frank:** More than 5 million African-Americans are reported having a mental illness. That's nearly 17.3% of the total Black U.S. population. Black teens are among the highest rising rate of mental illness right now, especially coming right out of the pandemic. Let 's dig into it.

Welcome to HU2U, the podcast where we bring today's important topics and stories from Howard University right to you. I'm Frank Tramble, today's host. And I'm here with, I tell you, one of my favorites, Dr. Alfiee Breland-Noble, Howard alum and founder of the AAKOMA Project, a nonprofit for the mental health of the youth and the youth adults of color.

Welcome to the podcast. How are you doing, Dr. Alfiee?

[00:00:49] **Alfiee:** Oh my God, HU, you dope.

[00:00:51] **Frank:** Oh, you know it.

[00:00:52] **Alfiee:** I'm all in my fields. This is, like, so amazing for me. So, thank you for having me. I am ecstatic.

[00:00:58] **Frank:** So, I got to start it off of how we met because the Howard connection is always wonderful, you know. Dr. Alfiee and I were at a conference in Utah, of all places.

[00:01:07] **Alfiee:** Of all places.

[00:01:08] **Frank:** And I see this beautiful Black expert up in a room. It's only a couple Black people in the room, us being included in there. And I get up there to ask her some questions. And I didn't actually know at the moment that she was from Howard University. And th e next thing you know, there's an HU that pops out. And I go, you know, right?

[00:01:25] **Alfiee:** That's it.



[00:01:25] **Frank:** And then everyone in the room looks around, like, “Hey, what is going on?” And we just look up and say, “It’s the Howard Connection. Don’t worry about it.”

[00:01:30] **Alfiee:** That’s it. That’s right. That’s right.

[00:01:32] **Frank:** Well, I am so happy to have you on the podcast. Let’s kick this off. Can you talk a little bit about the AAKOMA Project? What is it?

[00:01:38] **Alfiee:** Sure. So, the AAKOMA project started as my research lab. I am always teasing that I’m a recovering academic. That’s true. I spent about 18 years in academia at Duke, then Georgetown, and then I left and took my research lab, which was the AAKOMA Project, and turned it into a 501(c)(3), because my perspective was the work that I was doing, it’s always been important. But I think there are ways in which, in traditional academia, I think I might have been, at this stage of my life, I say probably a little bit ahead of my time. And so, I needed to be in a space where I could collaborate with young people, with communities of color, with families of color to support young people’s mental health.

And that’s what the AAKOMA Project is about. We’re about three pillars: raising consciousness, empowering people, and changing the system of mental health, with a specific focus on intersectionality in our young people of color, meaning young people of color or are not just of color. They also have other identities. LGBTQIA+ and of color, young people with disabilities and of color. And so, for us, it’s all about how do we embrace all of who they are and support their mental health. So, that’s the AAKOMA Project.

[00:02:48] **Frank:** Ah, wonderful. It’s, it’s some needed work. So, why, why do we focus on teens? You know, where, where did that come from?

[00:02:53] **Alfiee:** Yeah, so the focus on teenagers is because, I’ll make this story brief, when I was growing up, I’m from Virginia Beach, Virginia. I’m the same hometown as The Neptunes, Pharrell and Chad Hugo, Timbaland, all them people, right?

[00:03:04] **Frank:** Okay. All right. We now we know our music, all right.

[00:03:06] **Alfiee:** That’s it. That’s it. And where we grew up, I feel like, young people of color, in particular, didn’t have a lot of support. And I just felt like, when I grew up, I wanted to be a person who could support young people, particularly around these issues of emotional wellbeing and mental health. So, you know, I’m Gen X. So, when I was growing up, we didn’t talk about this stuff at all. And it’s gotten better, but, you know, young people need outlets.

They have stressors. Young people today have far different stressors than I ever had to deal with as a young person. You know, you got climate anxiety. You got these same social justice issues, but they're different. You know, they're more heightened. You got social media. We don't even want to get on social media.

So, it's important to work with our young people because, you know, the old cliché, they are our future. And they're precious, right? And so, I want to always make sure that every young person I encounter feels seen, heard, and valued. That's my thing. Because in my home, I felt all of that; outside of my home, not so much. And many young people struggle with that. So, I always wanted to be like a soft landing for young people. So, that's why I focus on young folks.

[00:04:13] **Frank:** Yeah, I mean, I think that is such an important part because, you know, I, I look at my own space. Mental health was not something that was talked about. In fact, many of my family members also called it and I'm a "crazy," you know, or, "You didn't need those things," or you're just, you know, you're, kind of, lazy or, you know, whatever it is. But I think we all had...

[00:04:31] **Alfiee:** "You need Jesus."

[00:04:32] **Frank:** "You need Jesus," you know. There's always another term that we put to it, but there's a lot that goes into the mental health. Now, you... I think you just mentioned that you may have that support growing up. Can you talk a little bit about how important it is for the family dynamic to, kind of, play into what all of us, or especially our teens today have to deal with?

[00:04:48] **Alfiee:** Yeah. So, there's this old saying, I don't even know who the author is, but I just want to acknowledge it's not something that I made up. And, you know, they say hurt people hurt people?

[00:04:58] **Frank:** Yeah.

[00:04:59] **Alfiee:** And I think, often, it's unintentional. I think, often, parents and caregivers, because not everybody who parents or rears a child is a biological parent, right? So, we say parents and caregivers. A lot of caregivers haven't healed from their own childhood difficulties or childhood traumas or just lack of knowledge around mental health and emotional wellbeing. And if they haven't had an opportunity to heal, they don't necessarily know how to help young people heal, right? Or, always point them in the right direction, particularly, when you think about our young people who do have these multiple identities, right?



So, you're always, in many ways, caught between two worlds. I think about queer young people who are of color being caught between their racial identity, where maybe that other aspect of their identity is not uplifted and supported. And then their queer identity, where their racial aspects are not uplifted and supported.

So, I just feel like, for the adults and caregivers in young people's lives, it's important for us to create the space to, more than anything, let young people know that who you are exactly as you are is beautiful. It's important. And it can only be enhanced if we support and take care of your mental health.

But we can't do that if we don't take care of our own. So, for me, it's important for us to acknowledge that there is an interplay between how parents and caregivers show up with our young people and how are young people fare in their own development around their mental health.

[00:06:25] **Frank:** Yeah. Now, the pandemic has probably made all of these things a million times worse. Talk a little bit about what is it that's happening to our teens today versus what it, you know, the development would've been prior to 2019 or 2020.

[00:06:38] **Alfiee:** That's so interesting. My daughter and I were just talking about that today, my daughter who's about to be a baby bison, which I love. I have to throw that in there. Yes, yes, great, great.

[00:06:46] **Frank:** All right. I got a baby bison around here, following the right footsteps. There you go.

[00:06:48] **Alfiee:** So, before the pandemic, these things were already an issue for our young people mental health. Particularly, I just want to highlight one in particular for Black young people. Five to 12-year-olds and younger, like, preteen Black youth have the highest growing, fastest growing rate of suicide of any racial ethnic group of young people. That was before the pandemic.

[00:07:14] **Frank:** Wow.

[00:07:14] **Alfiee:** Since the pandemic, what we've seen is that all of our young people have been struggling. And I think part of the challenge has been we didn't pay enough attention to our young people's mental health prior, and it was just exacerbated by the isolation, the challenges around, how do you school people if you don't bring them together? The



developmental, I don't know a better term, but the developmental challenges in terms of our young people not having the settings being at school to engage and interact, which is part of their development. So, how do you learn how to make friends if you're not around anybody, those kinds of things.

All of those things exacerbated the mental health challenges, on top of, what did everybody turn to? They were on devices all day for school. And they just stayed on devices all night with social media because that was their means of connection. So, all of these things made a perfect storm of challenges for our young people that, unfortunately, we are going to be dealing with and witnessing in terms of the manifestation of them for decades.

So, I'll give you two quick statistics. Over 50% of the young people of color we surveyed in a study that we did last summer, the AAKOMA Project, over 50% of all of the young people of color we surveyed, said that they had moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety in the prior week before we surveyed them and in the prior year.

So, those kinds of challenges, you know, if we don't take steps to try to at least name them to find a way to address them, I think they will continue to show up and be challenges for our young people.

[00:08:43] **Frank:** Wow. Wow. You know, I know between 2018 and 2021, Black suicide rate actually increased by 19.2% according to the CDC. And that's just, you know, horrible numbers to continue down that path.

[00:08:56] **Alfiee:** Yes, 100%. And part of the way that we've tried to deal with this, I personally am, the AAKOMA Project, is working with our federal people, people at the policy level, to do things like introduce something called the Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act, by Representative Bonnie Watson Coleman, 12th District of New Jersey. She's amazing. And this report called The Ring the Alarm report that was put together by myself, a whole, like, a plethora of Black scholars, including Dr. Michael Lind sey from New York University School of Social Work, where we talk specifically about the Black youth suicide rate and what we need to be doing to try to address it. So, we have to have people like the congresswoman who value these kinds of issues and who will do what we said, ring the alarm and say we have to do something.

[00:09:42] **Frank:** Yeah, I'm curious about a question. I'm a social media guy. Love social media, love honestly what it can provide. But also, I found that social media, as it's now progressed since, you know, really, the 2003, '04 time when it really first got created and it was



that real genuine sense of I'm trying to engage with people, and I felt like it's gotten to a place where it's really difficult now to balance, especially with teens who have really grown up in this era, the balance between I need to connect with someone, but also not understanding how to connect with someone in person. Do you find that there's a, kind of, a connection piece there? Because I feel like the teens today, especially our young adults, are, kind of, leading the mental health, kind of, charge, but at the same time have also, I would say, not the greatest mental health practices.

So, I hear the drumbeat of, "I want to work from home and I don't want to work the, you know, 80 hours that my mother and grandparents had to work. At the same time, I'm going to spend all my time on the phone. I'm going to spend all my time not really connecting and doing things that also make me feel alienated and alone even more in that space." So, how do teens navigate this type of space right now?

[00:10:49] **Alfiee:** I wish people could see me nodding my head furiously as you're talking because you are one of the few people I've encountered who actually just really nailed it in terms of talking about this juxtaposition between our young people, youth, and young adults are all beating the drum. Just to use your words, we got to take care of our mental health.

I think the challenge is, it's one thing to talk about it, particularly in diverse communities, it's another thing to be about it, like we used to say back in the day, right? We want you to talk about it and be about it.

And I think the one thing it comes down to for me is coping skills. Do our young people, youth and young adults, have coping skills? I think if you ask them, which we have, they would say, "Absolutely." And then, you ask them to describe them to you, not so much, right? And so, I think there is this idea that it's cool to talk about mental health and, I think, particularly for young people of color, for other people. "That doesn't necessarily apply to me and the people in my family."

Because I think we have to think about, for many of them, they're the mavericks in their family. They're the first ones to even talk about this as a thing. So, where's your model? Who are you following, right?

[00:11:59] **Frank:** Yeah.

[00:11:59] **Alfiee:** What reinforcement do you have to say? Yes, you talking about mental health and doing something about it is a big thing. And so, I think this lack of coping skills and



not having had people show you what active coping looks like, I think, really does more harm to our young people than it does good. So, I'm just want to... I just want to appreciate what you've said about, yes, everybody can talk about it, but being about it is something very different.

I'm not saying they have no coping skills, I'm saying that it has been challenging for our young people to continue to utilize and hold onto their coping skills. One, because they haven't been taught a lot of them. They don't have the models. And two, because there's just so much stuff coming at them, right?

So, to your point about social media, I think it's important for young people to have access because I think social media, for those of us who identify as people of color or anybody with the marginalized identity, it allows you to amplify your voice in ways that you never had prior. But if you don't... like I always say, if you don't manage social media, social media is going to manage you.

[00:13:02] **Frank:** All right. Say it again.

[00:13:03] **Alfiee:** Right. So, I don't see enough of our young people with the skillset. I'm not saying none of them have them. I'm just saying I haven't seen enough with the skillset that allows them to manage it so that they are not being managed by it.

[00:13:17] **Frank:** So, a lot of your points are coming back to they just don't have the model, right? Is that the reason why we're not going to get help? Is it just, if I have the right parents that, that push into it, is that the real critical portion of that? And if for the students and the young folks who don't have that, how do they know to go get help?

[00:13:35] **Alfiee:** They don't, right? So, I think if you don't have somebody in your immediate vicinity saying to you.. didn't have to be a blood relative, but somebody saying to you, taking care of your mental health, I'm just speaking as a Black woman, is not self-indulgent, it's necessary, if you don't have people saying that, the messaging that you're getting is that it's self-indulgent. Oh, you just going to go sit and whine about your problems, right? And so, in my family, it was very much suck it up, you know. Like, my parents were civil rights generation. And my parents were from Mississippi, so you don't really know what struggle is because we were getting put in parchment for marching. You know what I'm saying?

And so, you can deal with... I literally remember this from being a freshman at Howard. You could stay up and write that paper. That ain't stress, you know what I mean? It was that kind of



thing. And so, I think what we really have to have is opportunities for our young people to have access to culturally responsive care. You need to see people who look like you. At least have people who understand your background and where you're coming from and who are willing to listen and be open and work with you. You got to have that. You got to have affordability, right?

And then, I think the other thing you have to have is access to something that resonates with you. Everybody doesn't need to sit in a psychologist or psychiatrist or clinical social workers chair for 50 minutes. That's not for everybody. So, they need accessibility in a multitude of ways. If they have that and they have somebody encouraging them, then I think it makes it a little bit easier to access care.

[00:14:56] **Frank:** Yeah, and I think many go to social media to find that, but there's also a lot of voices on social media. Do you have any advice on, how can you spot the right person? Because I mean, I'm telling every listener, you need to look at the AAKOMA Project. If Dr. Alfiee's speaking, that's who you need to listen to. But for those who don't know, you know, they may listen to the influencer, and that pretty much everyone's trying to be an influencer in a lot of spaces, that's trying to pull on information and may not be the best one. What's the characteristics of that our young folks should be looking for when they do go to social media to find what expert in person that they can rely on?

[00:15:30] **Alfiee:** I say the biggest one is, how does it make you feel when you watch that person's content? If it's making you feel bad about yourself, if it's making you feel like you're not good enough, if it's making you feel like you're doing things wrong, that's probably not the person to follow.

I think you want to look for credibility. How do you know if they're credible? Look at their credentials, right? Not everybody needs alphabet suit behind their name, but you don't necessarily want to just listen to the person who's just coming out of a mental health struggle because there's only certain things they can teach you, right? I think it is, look at the person. Do they look like you? Are they speaking like you? Can they speak to things that resonate with your background and your experience? I think those are some of the key features that you have to look for, rather than how many people follow them and do they have that check mark by their name? A lot of people go for that, and that becomes the marker of credibility. And that's definitely not the only marker of credibility.

[00:16:21] **Frank:** I remember when the poke first came out on Facebook and the change in society when people would go through a whole day or... and feel "Someone poked me or no one poked me today." And then, it became the likes. It's like, "No one likes anything on my page," and, and, kind of, what we drive ourselves for social acceptance in those spaces.

And I always encourage my students and my... and the young folks around me to have the balance, the balance of be on social media, that's fine. You know, engage with things, that's fine. However, when you talk to your friends, look them in the eye.

[00:16:52] **Alfiee:** That's right.

[00:16:52] **Frank:** Speak to them.

[00:16:53] **Alfiee:** That's right.

[00:16:53] **Frank:** You know, get off the phone.

[00:16:54] **Alfiee:** That's right.

[00:16:55] **Frank:** You know, when we come to dinner, let's try to get off of those moments and have those personal connections because... and I always use this example. People think direct mail is dead in a sense or whatnot. But if I sent you an e-card for your birthday, would that mean more to you than if I just wrote on a Post-it note, "I love you, happy birthday," and handed it to you? Because that personal connection, I still think, is the only thing that's going to keep us all together. I think it's the thing that drives us all the way through.

[00:17:19] **Alfiee:** I love that. And I just want to highlight one thing that you said. Our surgeon general, I have so much respect for him and the work he's doing around young people's mental health, Dr. Vivek Murthy. They have a whole new website on the surgeon general's page about exactly what you said, the social connectedness.

And I personally have to say, I would much rather you write on a Post-it note to me, even if you just drew some symbols and say, you know, with a little heart and a smiley face, I would much rather have that than just a text, because a text is easy. Writing that note means you put some thought into it.

[00:17:47] **Frank:** Yeah. So, it's all back up to the thought. Tell me a little bit about, what message are you trying to push to the world? For the listeners that are out there and they just



want to know, well, why do I need to know what Dr. Alfiee's talking about, what's the message you have for them?

[00:17:58] **Alfiee:** The message that I have for people, there are two primary messages. The message that I have for young people through the AAKOMA Project is that we envision a world at the AAKOMA Project where every young person has the opportunity to live unapologetically and authentically as the best version of themselves. That's, that's for the AAKOMA Project.

For me personally, in my brand at Dr. Alfiee, I have this thing that I say to people all the time, and I really believe it deeply. And what I want for every young person, everybody, everybody in the sound of my voice and just everybody, is for them to proudly and easily share their light with everyone they encounter, knowing the goodness of the universe in every moment. And even if the universe feels like it's not good in the moment, there's still goodness in it. At my husband's church, they had a guest pastor, so I want to credit him with these words. He said, you can live in an oppressive society but not have an oppressed spirit. And that is what we want to communicate to people, both from Dr. Alfiee and at the AAKOMA Project.

[00:18:54] **Frank:** Oh, I love that. I love that. So, we're, of course, a podcast for solutions. So, what are some other resources that... and let's start with the mothers and fathers of the world, the parents. What are some resources that they can go to in order to get, you talked a little bit about the surgeon general page, for advice on just how to navigate the complexities of their growing young teens?

[00:19:14] **Alfiee:** Absolutely. I'll tell you two. One is we just did this special event called "Revelations: Uncovering Truths" about the state of mental health of youth of color. We have a host of people of different racial ethnic backgrounds. It is absolutely beautiful, different gender identities, queer folks, folks with disabilities. And so, they should go watch that. It's two hours. It's on AAKOMA Project's website. That's one.

Two is there's this amazing resource that I'm a part of that I help to create and support, called, Sound It Out. Sound It Out is for parents, caregivers, and young people to support them through the power of music to find ways to communicate about young people's mental health. And the website is sounditouttogether.org. And it's put together by some organization. Everybody knows the Ad Council.

So, I would say those are two key resources that people can use, kind of, low-hanging fruit. Like, you know, we talked about smartphones. You could watch those videos on your smartphone. You can pull up that stuff on your smartphone at sounditouttogether.org.



And the other thing I will say is, if you have nothing else, you have the power of something you say. Connectedness and communication. Talk to your kids. Put your phone down. Put your head up. Like you said, look your kids in the eye and give them your undivided attention. Doesn't matter if they're babbling about nothing. Just be there to listen. And what you're demonstrating to a child is that you love them because you're willing to just hear whatever it is they have to say without judgment. So, mouth close, ears open. Those are some things I would say caregivers and parents can do.

[00:20:38] **Frank:** Yeah, I love that. You know, I got to tell a quick story that just came up with that comment. My son is turning four. And he did something to me. This may have been last year that even caught me off guard, because I was actually in my phone and I'm emailing on my phone all day. I'm, I'm, kind of, constantly doing that. And he was saying, you know, "Daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy." And I was like, "Give me a second. Give me a second." And he grabs my face, and he turns my face straight to his and said, "Daddy." And he looked me in the eye. And I just... I melted for a second and I felt so horrible because it was a moment where I was like, "Wow, he just really wants my attention."

Now after that, he babbled on about absolutely nothing. And I was... he's just like, "Well, you know, daddy I've jumped off the couch." I'm like, "Okay, thank you for letting me know that." But, but from that point, I started to realize just how much our body's physiology needs the connection.

[00:21:29] **Alfiee:** Yes. Yes.

[00:21:30] **Frank:** And I think that's what drives social media, but that's also what drives the imbalance that happens when your body does not get the hug, you know. There, there's actually a lot of studies, and we can have a whole other conversation right now about the lack of physical touch for people right now and how that's becoming a bit of an endemic problem for some. It made me think about that story of how that, even at three, four years old, we got to be able to notice those things early.

And I always think about you. And for our listeners, I'm telling you, Dr. Alfiee is the realest one of all. I'm all about authenticity. And, you know, one of the things that has always stood out to me about you is how what you do and say, whether we're watching you on Red Table Talk or Jake Tapper or every wonderful place that you've been, is actually how I look at you throughout your entire life and how you actually mother, how you actually show up when you talk about your daughter and who I regard as one of just the best examples of, I'm putting her



on a pedestal, too, so she's going to have to keep living up to this, but someone who is really exemplifying what it means to develop young, be mature, be respectful, still balance and be a part of today's culture. I mean, she, kind of, hits every single mark, you know, right on. I was a huge, not a fan of the gap year thing at all. She's been showing me a whole different mindset of what a gap year can look like and how great that can be for a student. And I've never thought about that until I've met her.

But all that, of course, goes back to something you said. It's about the parents. It's about what you instill in them and how you allow them to be able to develop in the right sense.

[00:23:02] **Alfiee:** Yes. Thank you.

[00:23:03] **Frank:** So, let's talk to the the teens for a second. For our baby bison that are coming in, what resources are available to them to make sure that they're prepared?

[00:23:11] **Alfiee:** A couple things. Find out where the counseling center is on campus. Make use of the counseling center. Develop relationships with your RA, develop relationships with your peers. Join clubs, right? We know you're here to get your education and, not but, part of your education is those soft skills, right? Developing the ability to introduce yourself to somebody you don't know.

My daughter told me this great story through you, Mr. Tramble, of meeting... I think she's, like, vice president for academic affairs or something like that. And the sister looked her in the eye and said, "Do you know your... do you have your, like, your bison intro yet?"

[00:23:49] **Frank:** Your HU intro, yeah.

[00:23:50] **Alfiee:** HU intro. And I was like, "And this is why you go to Howard, right?" Because you need the soft skills. You need somebody to teach you your elevator pitch, right? So, it is... I remember what it's like to be a first year at Howard. Howard, for me, was intimidating and completely overwhelming. I had never been around so many beautiful Black folks in my life. And it took me a while to find my place.

But had I joined clubs earlier, had I gotten engaged earlier, I think it would've been a lot easier if had I gone and figured out where the counseling center was, so I could go get the help that I needed. It would've just been a much better opportunity much earlier for me.



So, those are some of the things I would tell our young people. And I would say, “Look, whoever your sources of social support are, everybody only needs one good person.” You just need one good person that you can trust and who you can talk to no matter what. When I came to Howard, that was my mom. God rest her soul. But I could call her anytime day or night.

I feel like this is what our young people need. So, you find that one good person that could be related to you or not, but if you can build that social support around you, I think it's going to make it that much easier to adjust and to thrive.

[00:24:50] **Frank:** All right. Well, you all heard it here from Dr. Alfiee. Thank you so much for joining the podcast.

[00:24:56] **Alfiee:** My pleasure, anytime. I love my university, Mr. Tramble. You are just amazing. And thank you all for having me.

[00:25:03] **Frank:** All right. This is HU2U, the podcast where we bring in today's important topics and stories from Howard University right to you. I am Frank Tramble, today's host. Thank you for listening. HU, you know. All right.