

# Beyond the Salon Chair: Beauty Spaces as a Pillar of Mental Health in BIPOC Communities

March 6, 2025

**Editor's note:** This op-ed was written by Deborah Rodriguez, DSW, LICSW, LADC1, MAPGSII, Licensed Esthetician. She earned her Doctorate in Social Work from Simmons University and currently serves as a program manager at Baystate Health Systems. She is committed to closing the mental healthcare gap for marginalized communities, through innovative interventions such as implementing mental health training for beauty industry workers and faith-based communities. This op-ed is part of our [Special Series on Addiction and Social Support](#).



Mental health has become increasingly urgent due to the longstanding opioid crisis, the impacts of COVID-19, and heightened racial tensions in the U.S. Together, these issues have escalated stress, trauma, and the need for mental health support. The opioid epidemic has deeply affected families and communities, especially where

treatment resources and other critical services are already limited, while COVID-19 introduced widespread isolation, economic hardship, and loss, leaving many struggling with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. Additionally, rising awareness of racial inequality has highlighted the mental toll of systemic discrimination on Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) communities, who often face unique barriers to accessing care. In response, there's a pressing need for mental health support in accessible, culturally relevant spaces—places of trust and belonging where individuals can speak openly and find support without stigma or judgment.

Historically, spaces like beauty salons and faith-based communities have provided a strong sense of belonging, trust, and acceptance for the BIPOC community, free

from the guarded bureaucracy and institutional barriers often found in more formal settings. These environments have become vital places of connection and support.

When I started my first job at seventeen, I prioritized saving for regular hair and nail appointments. Each salon visit became more than a routine; I found myself seeking not just skillful styling, but an atmosphere where I could relax and connect. Spending three to five hours in the salon, I realized these spaces were about more than just appearance—they were places for mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, cherished across generations and cultures.

Salons have evolved into informal hubs for mental health support. The close client-stylist relationship fosters trust, creating a relaxed environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing personal issues, emotional struggles, and family crises. This familiar atmosphere encourages openness, transforming these ‘beauty’ spaces into emotional sanctuaries. Research since the 1970s, including studies by [Roper and Barry](#), highlights the depth of these conversations, showing they can be as meaningful as discussions with mental health professionals. [Solomon et al. \(2004\)](#) found clients often view their beauticians as trusted sources of support, confiding in them about personal health and family matters. Like many others, I’ve shared milestones, family losses, and life events with my hairstylist, nail technician, and massage therapist. In therapeutic practice, [Carl Rogers \(1951\)](#) emphasized active components in the client-practitioner relationship: empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. Research suggests these qualities can account for up to 30% of positive health outcomes, highlighting the importance of the connection itself.

The potential of these spaces to act as mental health hubs is especially important given the mental health challenges in the U.S. today. In 2016, the [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) reported 22.8% of American adults—approximately 57.8 million—experience some form of mental illness, with 5.5% facing serious mental illness. For BIPOC communities, however, accessing quality mental health care remains challenging due to insufficient and inadequate services in their neighborhoods. As [Whaley \(1998\)](#) noted, this lack of access can result in underdiagnosis and undertreatment, perpetuating stigma, silence, and untreated mental health issues in these communities.

Although several programs, such as Gatekeeper Training, Psychological First Aid ,

Mental Health First Aid, and Spiritual First Aid, aim to address mental health needs across various sectors, none specifically focus on the beauty industry. This industry has unique potential for providing emotional and social support, as noted by [Anderson et al. \(2010\)](#). Project TEA (Therapeutic Emotional Support and Access to Care) bridges this gap by equipping beauty industry professionals with the skills to support BIPOC individuals, helping foster safe spaces where clients can share their struggles with trusted beauty professionals.

Project TEA provides resources and training to beauty industry workers, helping them understand their role in connecting clients to appropriate mental health resources while respecting their professional boundaries. This approach ensures that while they offer support, they refer individuals to licensed professionals when necessary. Through Project TEA, beauty industry workers also build their understanding of mental health, learn self-care techniques, and gain access to mental health resources for themselves.

Some key interventions used in Project TEA include:

- Training on culturally sensitive, inclusive approaches to support clients.
- Trauma-informed principles that help stylists and barbers respond to clients who may have experienced trauma.
- Experiential learning, offering hands-on training to apply mental health concepts.

Through these efforts, Project TEA aims to create a more inclusive, supportive, and mentally healthy environment within the beauty industry, ensuring BIPOC communities have greater access to the care and support they need. The project is rooted in the belief that equity and access are essential, recognizing that beauty professionals already serve as confidants and emotional supports, and are uniquely positioned to help bridge the gap in mental health care for underserved populations. By understanding their limitations and working in tandem with mental health professionals, beauty industry workers can play a pivotal role in supporting the mental well-being of their communities.

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