Drowning Without a Life Jacket
A therapist uses a Liberation Health approach to look at all the factors and develop an action plan.

Mahlet Meshesha

BEFORE YOU READ: Think about the word *factors*. What factors contribute to the challenges you face? Define *personal*, *cultural*, and *institutional* factors.
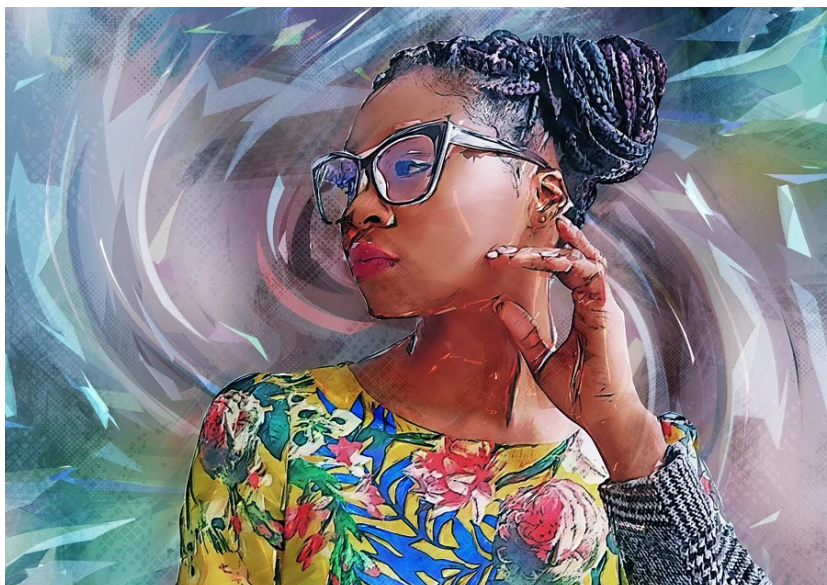
Sleepless Nights

"Ugh, it's 3:15 am. I am never going to fall asleep. Only two more hours until my alarm goes off. I have to remember to pick up Dad's prescription. I wish my brother would pick it up! I really hope Dad just has a cold… Maybe we should get him tested for Covid-19? But he can't go alone… No one there speaks Somali, and I can't take work off again. What if I gave it to him? If only work gave us enough masks! My chest is hurting again. Now, I am definitely not falling asleep! I don't have time for this. Aisha, you have to push through! There are people depending on you. Your father did not raise you to be weak and give up! Now go to sleep!"
— Aisha (a pseudonym)

Like Aisha, I'm sure many of us have had sleepless nights, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. 2020 was a tough year, and let's be honest, 2021 is not off to a great start. When my clients feel stuck, I like to use the Liberation Health Triangle to visualize all the factors that play a role in their everyday lives and how to create an action plan to move forward.

Taking a Different Approach

Liberation Health says the problems we face on a daily basis are influenced by many external factors. Our social, cultural, economic, and political environments play a significant role in how we see ourselves and others. To address our problems, we need to be free (or liberated!) from the internal and external oppressions that we face. When I met with Aisha, I asked her to share her struggles while I wrote them down. I used the Liberation Health Triangle to organize her thoughts.

She mentioned being exhausted, overwhelmed, overworked, and worried about her dad's health. She said she felt like she was "drowning without a lifejacket." Aisha thought that this drowning feeling was the best way to describe the problem, so I wrote "drowning without a life jacket" in the center of the triangle.

After naming the problem, we listed all the factors that contributed to her problem. It looked something like this:

Personal Factors
- difficulty sleeping for many years
- chest pain
- being responsible for father's care

Cultural Factors
- sexism—family members rely on women more than men for caretaking work
- the idea that it is not okay to ask for help

Institutional Factors
- racism—Covid has hit communities of color harder than white communities
- anti-immigrant policies—health care clinic does not have Somali interpretation
- mistreatment of frontline workers—her employer does not supply enough masks or sufficient paid sick time or family medical leave
- U.S. public health system does not have sufficient response to the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving individuals to figure it out on their own

What Happened Next?

After we studied the triangle, Aisha could see that many stresses she was experiencing were not her fault. This process made her feel less guilty.

It also helped her think about an action plan. Her action plan included finding more "life jackets" for when she feels likes she is drowning. For example, is there a neighbor who could help with errands? Could she ask her brother for help? Is there a source of free masks in the community? Are her co-workers experiencing similar struggles, and could they organize together to approach their employer about making changes? Is there a local immigrant organization that could advocate for better interpretation services? Many of these "life jackets" are a reminder to look to our community for help when possible.

When Aisha first came to me, she felt like she was drowning without a life jacket. Now, life is of course not perfect, but she has more tools to keep her head above water. The Liberation Health Triangle is a reminder that she is not alone, and that in itself is part of the healing process.

Liberation Health Triangle

Personal Factors

Institutional Factors

Problem Statement

Cultural Factors
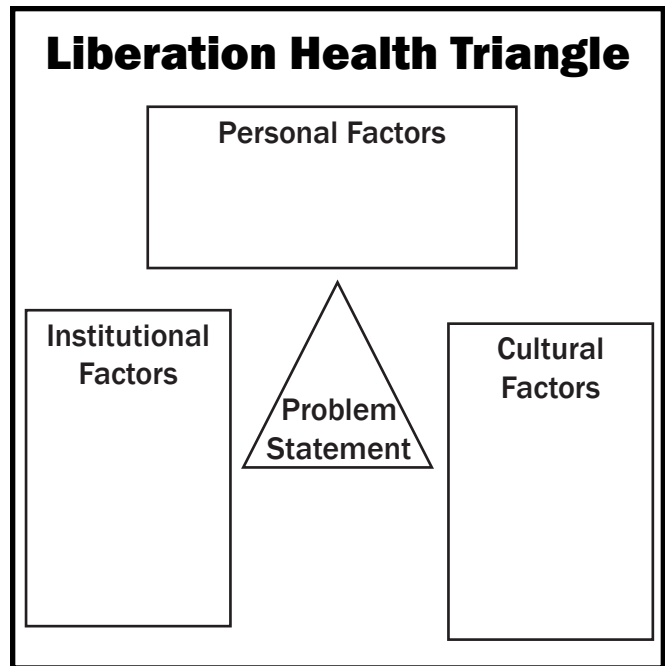
AFTER YOU READ:

1. What do you think about the idea that external factors *and* internal factors affect mental health?

2. Try completing the Liberation Health Triangle for yourself! Write down your "problem statement" in the middle of the page. Put a triangle around it. In three separate boxes, write down the *personal*, *cultural*, and *institutional* factors that contribute to the problem. Work alone or with a partner. Having a partner listen while you think it through might help. Also, consider what action steps you could you take.

Mahlet (she/her) is a school-based social worker who works predominantly with first-generation youth of Color born in the U.S. Her clinical practice is focused on decolonizing mental health treatment and addressing how structural and cultural factors impact mental health/wellness through a public health lens. She is a member of Boston Liberation Health.