



Through Our Lense

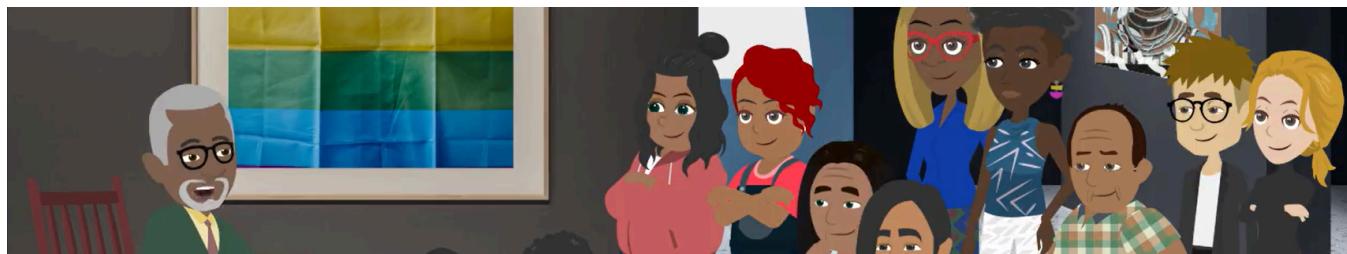
A Discussion guide to accompany the animation "Through Our Lens: Black LGBTQ+ Strength and Mental Health"

A Project of the National SOGIE Center and partners.

<https://sogiecenter.org>

Purpose

This discussion guide is designed for use after viewing the animation on Black LGBTQ+ mental health. It is meant to spark conversation, reflection, and learning. “Part 1: Going Deeper” will help participants engage thoughtfully with issues affecting Black LGBTQ+ communities, including social determinants of health, intersectionality, stigma, and HIV, while centering strength and resilience. “Part 2: Exhibit Guide,” provides details on the images viewers see within the museum. Many of the photographs and artwork were carefully selected to honor the legacy of Black and LGBTQ+ civil rights leaders.



Belonging, Identity, and Creating Space

The video opens with James Baldwin’s quote, “The place in which I’ll fit will not exist until I make it.” For Baldwin, a Black gay man living in a time of entrenched racism and homophobia, this statement captured the challenge and courage of building spaces where one’s full self is seen, valued, and safe. Today, Black LGBTQ+ people continue to navigate environments where they may experience rejection or invisibility, not only in broader society, but sometimes within Black communities and LGBTQ+ spaces themselves. This reality often means creating new spaces, organizations, chosen families, and cultural practices that affirm their identities.

Potential Discussion Questions

- When you hear Baldwin’s quote, what feelings or images come to mind?
- How have you, or people you know, had to “make” a place to belong?
- What is the difference between finding acceptance in existing spaces and building entirely new ones?

Social Determinants of Health and Mental Wellbeing

Social determinants of health such as housing, education, healthcare access, employment, income, and environmental quality all affect the life expectancy and quality of life for everyone. For Black LGBTQ+ people, discrimination in these areas compounds existing inequalities. For example, 40% of Black transgender adults report housing discrimination or instability, which can directly impact mental health. Avoidance of health services due to fear of discrimination is another barrier; nearly one in four Black LGBTQ+ people report skipping needed services for this reason. These realities highlight the ways that economic and social systems shape mental health.

Potential Discussion Questions

- How do you see housing, employment, or healthcare access affecting the mental health of people in your community?
- In your experience, how does the fear of discrimination influence whether people seek help?
- What changes to community resources or policies could reduce these barriers?

Intersectionality and Minority Stress

Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality helps us understand how overlapping identities, such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and age can shape people's experiences of discrimination. For Black LGBTQ+ people, these intersections can mean facing racism within LGBTQ+ spaces and anti-LGBTQ+ bias within Black spaces. These combined stressors, described by Minority Stress Theory, significantly impact mental and physical health. In fact, 95% of Black LGBTQ+ people report that discrimination has harmed their psychological well-being, and 83% report physical health impacts.

Potential Discussion Questions

- How do you see intersectionality showing up in your own life or in the lives of people around you?
- What kinds of microaggressions or subtle biases can be particularly damaging over time?
- How might understanding intersectionality change the way organizations provide services?

HIV, Stigma, and Health Disparities

The video touched on HIV, but this issue warrants deeper exploration. HIV continues to disproportionately impact Black LGBTQ+ communities: Black gay and bisexual men make up nearly half of all Black people living with HIV, and research shows particularly high rates among Black transgender women.

HIV, Stigma, and Health Disparities (cont.)

Factors driving these disparities include stigma around testing and treatment, healthcare discrimination, lack of culturally competent care, and the effects of poverty and housing insecurity. HIV criminalization laws (policies that impose harsher penalties based on HIV status) further entrenched stigma and discourage people from seeking testing or care.

Potential Discussion Questions

- How does stigma influence whether people get tested or seek treatment for HIV?
- What role do poverty, housing, and access to healthcare play in HIV transmission rates?
- How can we challenge harmful narratives and policies around HIV in our own communities?

Inclusive and Affirming Services Provision

Providing effective services to Black LGBTQ+ individuals requires a commitment to understanding and respecting the full range of their lived experiences. This means recognizing how intersecting identities can influence the way individuals interact with service systems. Providers can build trust and improve outcomes by intentionally creating welcoming environments, listening without judgment, and adapting practices to individual needs. Small but meaningful actions, such as using inclusive language, ensuring forms acknowledge diverse family structures, offering a range of gender identity and pronoun options, and displaying symbols that affirm both Black and LGBTQ+ identities can signal that all aspects of a person's identity are valued. True inclusion also means going beyond visible signals of support to ensure policies, staffing, and service delivery consistently reinforce safety, dignity, and respect.

Potential Discussion Questions

- What does it look like when a service environment is truly welcoming and affirming for Black LGBTQ+ individuals?
- How can organizations ensure their inclusion efforts go beyond surface-level gestures?
- In what ways can providers adapt their practices to meet the specific needs of Black LGBTQ+ clients?

Intersectionality and Minority Stress

Despite systemic barriers, Black LGBTQ+ communities show remarkable resilience. Pride in both Blackness and queerness, community gatherings, ballroom culture, and chosen families all serve as sources of joy and resistance to oppression. Figures like Audre Lorde, Bayard Rustin, and Marsha P. Johnson remind us of a long history of leadership and activism in the face of exclusion.

Intersectionality and Minority Stress (cont.)

Potential Discussion Questions

- Where do you see examples of resilience and joy in Black LGBTQ+ communities today?
- How can allies support spaces and traditions that foster this resilience?
- What role do arts, culture, and history play in building strength against discrimination?



A Call to Action

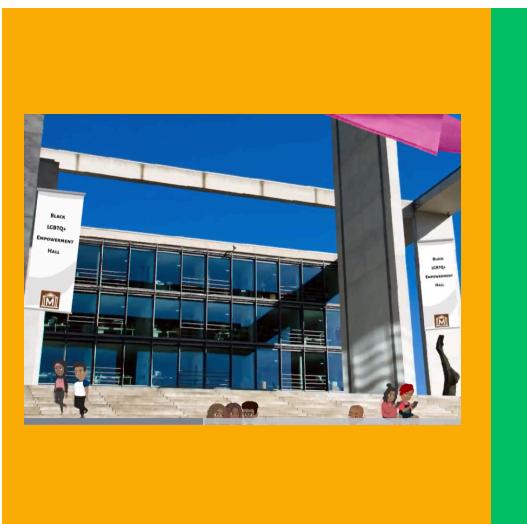
This animation invites us to consider our role in helping create spaces where Black LGBTQ+ people can thrive. The work that is required includes building systems, relationships, and communities where people are safe, affirmed, and supported in all parts of their identities.

Potential Discussion Questions

- What can you personally do to help “make” the places where Black LGBTQ+ people fit?
- How can your workplace, organization, or community center put these ideas into action?



Part 2: Exhibit Guide



"Black LGBTQ+ Empowerment Hall"

The name of this animated museum, "Black LGBTQ+ Empowerment Hall," reflects the museum's symbolic purpose as both a place of preservation and a space of possibility. It honors the histories, struggles, and triumphs of Black LGBTQ+ people while centering their voices, creativity, and resilience. The word *Empowerment* speaks to the museum's role in not only documenting the past but also inspiring action, pride, and self-determination in the present.

The setting of a museum itself is meant to be a powerful reminder that visibility, education, and celebration are all essential tools for resistance and liberation.



James Baldwin (1924–1987)

An American novelist, essayist, playwright, and activist whose work explored race, sexuality, identity, and justice in mid-20th-century America. A Black gay man, Baldwin used his sharp insight and lyrical prose to confront the realities of racism and homophobia, most famously in works like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *The Fire Next Time*, and *Giovanni's Room*. His voice remains a vital force in conversations about civil rights, LGBTQ+ liberation, and the power of creating spaces where all people can belong.



Kimberlé Crenshaw (Born in 1959)

An American legal scholar, civil rights advocate, and professor best known for coining the term intersectionality to describe how overlapping identities shape experiences of discrimination. A leading voice in critical race theory, she has worked extensively on issues of racial justice, gender equity, and legal reform, teaching at both UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School. Her scholarship continues to influence activism, policy, and academic work around the world.

MINORITY STRESS

The Minority Stress Theory asserts that these identity-based experiences of stress and stigma significantly impact the mental and physical health and life outcomes of Black LGBTQ+ people.

Color Palette Significance

In many African and Pan-African traditions, the colors red, yellow, and green carry powerful symbolic meaning. Red represents the blood shed in the fight for freedom and the resilience of African peoples, yellow (gold) symbolizes wealth, prosperity, and the richness of the land, and green stands for the continent's fertile land, growth, and renewal. Originating prominently in the Ethiopian flag and adopted by many nations after independence, these colors have become enduring symbols of African unity, pride, and liberation across the world.



Black Lives Matter & Rainbow Flag Art

The rainbow flag with the Black Lives Matter fist unites two symbols of liberation: LGBTQ+ pride and the fight against racial injustice. The rainbow reflects diversity and queer visibility, while the raised fist represents strength, unity, and resistance to oppression. Together, they call attention to the experiences of Black LGBTQ+ people and affirm that racial justice and queer equality are interconnected struggles.



Salon and Barbershop Installation

Historically, these spaces have been among the few Black-owned businesses that were allowed to thrive during segregation, providing economic independence and safe environments where people could speak freely about politics, community issues, and personal matters. Over generations, they became informal community centers where trust between patrons and owners runs deep.

Because of this trust and cultural significance, bringing community health services into these spaces can bridge gaps in access to care. Many people may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics in a familiar, affirming setting than in a clinical environment that might feel intimidating or unwelcoming.



Progressive Flag with Unity Hands Art

The “Progressive Flag” (often called the Progress Pride Flag) is a modern redesign of the rainbow flag meant to highlight inclusion within the LGBTQ+ movement. The traditional rainbow stripes represent LGBTQ+ pride and diversity, while the added black and brown stripes center racial justice and acknowledge the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color. The blue, pink, and white stripes come from the transgender pride flag, affirming visibility and rights for transgender and nonbinary people. The newest addition, a yellow triangle with a purple circle, represents intersex people and their fight for bodily autonomy and equality. Together, these elements signal that true LGBTQ+ liberation must be intersectional, embracing racial equity, gender diversity, and intersex rights alongside broader queer visibility. The image has hands at the bottom representing common humanity.



Audre Lorde (1934–1992)

A Black lesbian poet, writer, and activist whose work confronted racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism with fierce clarity and lyrical power. Calling herself a “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” she used her voice to champion intersectional justice long before the term was widely known. Through influential works like *Sister Outsider* and *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde inspired generations to embrace their identities as sources of strength and to fight oppression in all its forms.



Bayard Rustin (1912–1987)

A Black gay civil rights strategist, organizer, and activist best known for his role in planning the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. A close advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rustin was instrumental in promoting nonviolent protest as a cornerstone of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite facing discrimination for his sexuality, he remained a steadfast advocate for racial justice, economic equality, and human rights throughout his life.



Marsha P. Johnson (1945–1992)

A Black transgender activist, performer, and community organizer who became a key figure in the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Known for her role in the Stonewall uprising of 1969, she dedicated her life to advocating for the rights and safety of transgender people, sex workers, and unhoused LGBTQ+ youth. As a co-founder of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), Johnson's legacy lives on as a symbol of courage, resilience, and unapologetic visibility in the fight for queer and trans liberation.



AIDS Memorial Quilt Exhibit

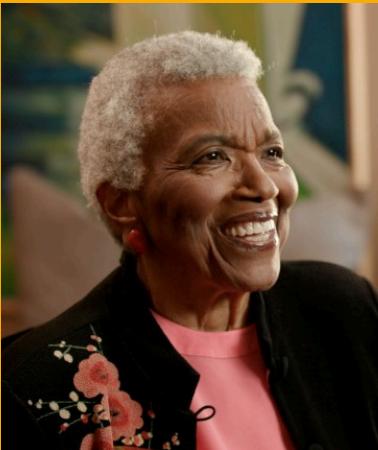
First created in 1987, is one of the largest pieces of community folk art in the world and a powerful symbol of remembrance and activism in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Comprising thousands of panels made by friends, family, and community members, each piece honors a life lost to AIDS with personal touches like names, photos, and mementos. At a time of intense stigma and governmental inaction, the Quilt brought visibility to the epidemic, serving both as a memorial and a protest. Its massive displays, sometimes covering the National Mall, made the scale of loss impossible to ignore, and it continues to educate, inspire, and honor those affected by HIV/AIDS today.



Bishop Carl Bean (1944–2021)

A gospel singer, minister, and lifelong advocate for the Black LGBTQ+ community, best known for his 1977 hit *I Was Born This Way*, which became an anthem of self-acceptance. In the early 1980s, during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, he founded the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, often called the “first affirming Black church for LGBTQ+ people,” and later the Minority AIDS Project in Los Angeles, the first organization of its kind in the U.S. focused on HIV/AIDS education and services for people of color. Through his ministry and activism, Bishop Bean provided spiritual refuge, fought stigma, and brought vital resources to Black gay men and others disproportionately affected by the epidemic, leaving a legacy of compassion, empowerment, and justice.

Jewel Thais-Williams (1939-2025)



A trailblazing activist, entrepreneur, and healer who has been a cornerstone of support for the Black LGBTQ+ community for decades. She founded the legendary Los Angeles nightclub Catch One in 1973, one of the first discos in the U.S. to welcome Black gay men and lesbians at a time when they faced exclusion from both Black and white queer spaces. During the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, she used the club as a hub for fundraising, education, and outreach, helping connect people to life-saving resources. Later, she became a licensed acupuncturist and co-founded the Village Health Foundation, providing affordable holistic healthcare in underserved communities. Her work has left an enduring legacy of creating safe spaces, fostering resilience, and breaking down barriers for marginalized people.

Ballroom Communities Exhibit



The ballroom community is a vibrant, underground subculture created primarily by Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender women, in the late 20th century as a refuge from racism, homophobia, and transphobia in mainstream society and even within other queer spaces. Built around competitive events known as "balls," participants form chosen families called "houses" that provide mentorship, shelter, and emotional support. These spaces celebrate self-expression through categories like dance, fashion, and performance, while also offering affirmation for identities that are often marginalized. Beyond its artistry and influence on popular culture, the ballroom scene has been a lifeline, fostering resilience, community care, and empowerment in the face of systemic oppression and the HIV/AIDS crisis.



Acknowledgements

This discussion guide, and the accompanying animation, would not have been possible without the generous contributions of the members of the Black LGBTQ+ community who shared their time, insights, and lived experiences with us. We are deeply grateful to the workgroup whose wisdom, vulnerability, and honesty guided the development of this tool.

Your voices shaped every aspect of this project and the emphasis on resilience, joy, and liberation. Throughout the year we worked on this together, you reminded us of the power of storytelling, the necessity of safe and affirming spaces, and the enduring strength of Black LGBTQ+ communities.

We thank you for trusting us with your truths, for challenging our innovation, and for ensuring that this work reflects not only the struggles but also the brilliance, creativity, and love at the core of Black LGBTQ+ life.

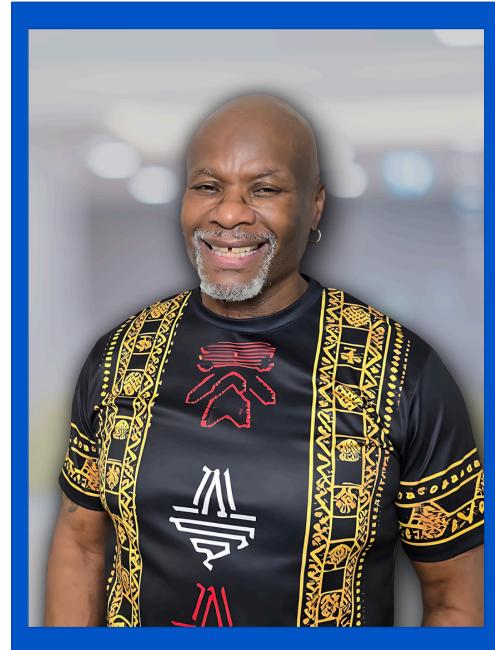


Workgroup Members

Solomon David (*he/him*) is an advocate for the mental health and well-being of Black transmasculine folks and Black transmen. He has a podcast, Band of Brothers Mental Health Podcast. It is available on Apple podcast and anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts.



Dr. Lawrence Bryant (he/him), PhD, MPH, BSW, RRT is a solution-focused professional with over 30 years of experience in behavioral health and public health. He specializes in developing curriculum, educating medical providers, and providing technical assistance and training in areas such as substance use disorders, HIV/AIDS, health disparities, unhoused populations, and respiratory therapy. Additionally, Dr. Bryant is certified in methamphetamine addiction and is a qualified trainer in the use of Narcan. As a seasoned leader, Dr Bryant helped develop and execute a statewide strategic plan for the opioid and prescription drug overdose epidemic in Georgia. With more than 20 peer-reviewed articles and numerous presentations at various conferences, his extensive experience as a registered respiratory therapist and behavioral health professional has thoroughly prepared him for teaching and performing in diverse medical, social, and community spaces. Dr Bryant has 33 years in long-term recovery.



Angela Weeks (she/her), DBA, MPA is the Director of the National SOGIE Center and has worked to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people and their families for over a decade. Her work focuses on developing custom programs for the population, implementation of best practices, evaluation, developing innovative learning resources, and system reform efforts.



Nevaeh Anderson (she/her) earned her B.A. in Theatre with a minor in Women's Studies from Metropolitan State University. During college, she became the youngest program manager at It Takes a Village, leading TransAction, a support group providing HIV prevention, education, and resources for Transgender women and men in the Denver area. With over seven years in HIV prevention and activism for Transgender and Black women, Nevaeh also gained experience in the cannabis industry. In 2017, she was invited to join TWIST, a behavioral health intervention for Transgender women living with HIV adapted from WILLOW, as a National Trainer. She helped develop Transgender-competent content, trained in the 1st TWIST pilot in 2017 and observed the 2nd in 2018. Now based in Atlanta, GA, Nevaeh continues working in HIV prevention while expanding her expertise in the DEI sector with organizations such as SisterLove, Inc., NMAC, and ORN, and by presenting at conferences nationwide. Most recently, through the PREFERRED Partnership project, she created Project: PREFERRED, a holistic curriculum for Transgender and Gender Diverse individuals, successfully piloted in July 2025.



Avery Irons' (She/Her) training, technical assistance, and policy work has focused on increasing supports and funding streams for community-based prevention and alternative programs, reducing racial and ethnic disparities, and strengthening protections for vulnerable populations in contact with justice systems. She has held positions at the New York State Youth Justice Institute, the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice, the Los Angeles LGBT Center's RISE Program, the Juvenile Justice Project at the Correctional Association of New York, and Children's Defense Fund-New York.



Dr. Dawn Tyus (she/her) is Director and Principal Investigator of the African American Behavioral Health Center of Excellence and the Southeast Addiction Technology Transfer Center at Morehouse School of Medicine, where she also serves as Adjunct Professor in the Department of Online Education and Expanded Programs. She holds a bachelor's in Criminal Justice, a master's in Community Counseling, and a PhD in Counseling Studies. A Georgia Licensed Professional Counselor, Dr. Tyus has extensive mental health experience with adults, families, youth, and young adults, and serves on multiple professional boards. She has received wide-ranging training in evidence-based therapeutic techniques and has worked with diverse populations. As a Behavioral Health Strategist, Dr. Tyus is dedicated to building supportive, resilient environments for individuals facing mental health challenges and advancing mental well-being in communities of color. She is also the owner of Everything Therapy, a mental health and wellness practice created to help people find Happiness, Healing, and Hope.

