# "Mental health is connected to everything": Lauren Carson of Black Girls Smile on integrating mental health care with other societal issues.

Ambar Castillo
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**Ambar Castillo: Can you please introduce yourself and speak a little bit about your role and how you came to this work?**

**Lauren Carson:** Hi, I'm Lauren Carson, the executive director and founder of Black Girls Smile. I founded the organization in 2012.

I have lived experience with clinical depression and anxiety. When I reflected on my personal journey, I started to be more open with my personal network and found that there were a lot of other people who wanted to talk about mental health and a lot of other people that were struggling with their mental health in silence. I started with some initial focus groups and saw that there was a real need. That is what was the impetus for starting Black Girls Smile.

**Ambar Castillo: What would you say is distinctive about your approach in this field?**

**Lauren Carson:** I would say what's unique about our approach is that we focus specifically on Black girls. We typically work with girls between the ages of 13 up to 25 or 26. There are a lot of other non-profit organizations that do amazing work, whether it's in the empowerment space, STEM, mentorship, youth development, and even specifically in the mental health space. But there are very few that directly focus on the needs of Black girls. Our approach combines cultural competency and gender responsive care for Black girls when it comes to mental health.

**Ambar Castillo: You mentioned your lived experience. How do your staff and the folks you work with also help ensure that cultural competency?**

**Lauren Carson:** Our staff is predominantly made up of Black women and girls. A lot of our staff members have a personal connection to mental health—whether it's through

professional training, struggling with their own mental health, or they know someone in their family that struggles with mental health. Everyone who works with the organization is closely connected to our mission, our work, and our community.

We also have a junior advisory board. There are about 16 girls from across the country that are heavily involved in our programming and organizational decision-making, [including] branding and marketing. [This ensures] that we have youth involved in the process and we're not just creating things that we think will work for them, but we're co-designing programs and initiatives and frameworks that really speak to the needs of Black girls today.

**Ambar Castillo: Is there an example of where including youth in that process helped either change a certain narrative you had about an aspect of the program or helped you avoid or do something different?**

**Lauren Carson:** Yes. We have a suicide prevention program that we are in the process of revamping. What was unique about this program is we worked with girls to provide a suicide prevention program that was girls talking to girls. Too often, when it comes to suicide prevention, it's normally about educating adults, or caregivers, or parents. In a lot of cases, we're leaving girls out of that equation. For this program, we really got the girls involved and found out the ways that they want to receive information and who they want it to be conveyed from.

**Ambar Castillo: What were the answers to that? How did they want to receive the information?**

**Lauren Carson:** It was interesting because it was a mixture. Going into it, we thought they would just want to hear from each other. They were like, "No, no, no. We actually do want to hear from adults. But we want to understand the background of the adults. We want to know how their work or their voice is relevant to us."

One of the things that we shifted a few years ago, with the help of the girls in our community, is really having an abundance mindset and not speaking about our work and the communities that we serve in a deficit way. We never feel like we're saving Black girls. We feel like we're doing things to empower Black girls. Particularly when you're talking about suicide prevention, just really shifting to an opportunities-based mindset and language was definitely a shift for us, but [it's what] the girls told us.

They didn't want to constantly feel like they're underserved and disinvested and all of these terms that are too often used, particularly by organizations to create a compelling argument to fund us. They were saying, "That's not how we view ourselves, and that's not the type of language that we want you to use around us."

**Ambar Castillo: What does shifting from deficit terms look like in conversations where you are also talking about the realities of underinvestment in certain communities or neglect in certain ways?**

**Lauren Carson:** It's taken some time and is still something that's ongoing. Where we started initially was pairing any statistics that we were sharing, any statements that we were making about our community and the population that we serve, with an affirming or opportunity-based statement. Instead of saying, "We're looking to decrease suicidal ideations as a measure," we would then pair that with something like, "We're looking to increase mental health knowledge to empower Black girls to access resources."

Shifting that deficit mindset of just fixing the divots and the gaps to actually expanding on the things that are already going well for Black girls.

**Ambar Castillo: That's language you use with the girls you're working with and also investors?**

**Lauren Carson:** Across the board. We're going through a website redesign currently. We've also updated some of our marketing materials. When we are measuring specific success metrics, we're shifting what we're measuring in some instances as well.

It's also some education, particularly on my part. And educating our funders as well. Funders are very used to asking, "How many people did you fix?" But there's some education on that end as well because we're not fixing anyone.

One of the other bigger things that came out of our youth involvement last year is a complete rebrand. As a founder, it's taken me some time to get used to some of the changes. Right now, our website is pink. With our new website, you're not going to see any pink. That's because that's not necessarily something that girls identify with these days. They don't feel like they have to be beholden to these soft, dainty colors all the time. We're shifting it and going with brown and purple and green and these colors that are really vibrant. Again, working with girls about what they want to hear from us and how they want to hear it. A part of that was making sure that we're more inclusive of what their identities look like in 2026.

**Ambar Castillo: Could you give a concrete example of what those new metrics would look like?**

**Lauren Carson:** One of the things that's been surprising for me in this mental health space is that social connection has become a metric that a lot of us use now. That's been really helpful. It was something that we were already thinking about how to measure. A lot of our programming that we do is group-based. We knew that there was some value there, not just for the individual, but for the collective. Some of the tools that are out there these days that measure things like social connection have been really encouraging because a lot of those are framed in an asset-based mindset.

Those are the good things that we've been shifting to as measures around social connection. The measures ask questions like, "Do you feel like this space affirmed your identity? Your intersections of identity? Did you feel included? Did you feel joy in participating?" So we are not just measuring whether they took something from [participating], but whether they felt connected in the environment that was created.

I think finding ways to lean into how youth want to engage is important. An example of that was, in 2024, we released a digital zine. I didn't know what a zine was. I always like when I can go to my team and say, "Hey, I want to achieve this." Then they're talking to our girls, and they're like, "Okay. Well, that sounds cool, but this is more so what we need, or this is how we need to see it." I remember, particularly with the zine, going to the team and saying, "Hey, we need a resource guide to share with girls that are attending this event that we have."

Essentially, they came back and said, "Well, we think that this should be more of a creative project. We think that this is something where we should actually get submissions from girls across the country." They actually curated and designed this whole digital zine that was on how Black girls access mental health resources. It really resonated with them. To see that transformed into something that really felt unique to Black girls today, that was really encouraging.

**Ambar Castillo: Have the girls you're working with, or the youths you're working with, brought up the idea of either compensation for their time and their involvement, or some kind of visible acknowledgements?**

**Lauren Carson:** What's interesting is we were fully on that train to compensate youth, but that can get into some gray areas. So we're shifting a little bit this year. Previously, particularly for our junior advisory board, they received monetary compensation, and then we added on last year, we did a retreat for them. We took them to Puerto Rico and added a professional development stipend, which was about $750, and a lot of the girls actually utilized that.

Now, we're shifting more towards that model, where they will definitely still be compensated for their time, but it will most likely not be in straight monetary compensation.

A lot of people in the mental health space are compensating youth with a stipend. Even foundations will have youth advisory councils, and they're normally compensating them in some way.

Our accounting and legal teams have let us know that, depending upon the amount, essentially anything over $50, then you get into employment law. "How long are they working? Are you recording their hours? Are they entitled to overtime? What do your contracts with them look like?" [Even though] I'm just trying to pay them for showing up, we're still paying them, so it is considered as a job.

**Ambar Castillo: Is there anything about that social connection? I imagine by providing experiences instead there's a social connection aspect that would maybe make it a better alternative if you do have to choose.**

**Lauren Carson:** Yes. We're hoping, with some of the other options that we've created, things like the retreat, things like the professional development, and adding some additional experiential and leadership opportunities, we're hoping that they're still really compelling for people to want to join.

**Ambar Castillo: Was there any feedback that stands out from the Puerto Rico trip, and how that relates to youth mental health?**

**Lauren Carson:** That's a good question. I would say the biggest theme that came up was around more opportunities to meet people from other cultures. Even the girls that we're meeting-- none of the girls were from Puerto Rico, but even the girls that we brought together, this was their first time all being together. Being able to engage with another culture, being able to be together, I think that the social connection was significantly highlighted during that experience for the girls. Even thinking about travel as a part of mental health was something that was really new for a lot of the girls.

**Ambar Castillo: Was that coming from them thinking of travel as a form of self-care, or was that something that they were mirroring and repeating back?**

**Lauren Carson:** I think it was more of a connection with the way that we built out the program. The program had a lot of cultural immersion. Not necessarily team building, but activities for them to engage with each other and for them to engage in the culture. That's where that feedback came from.

**Ambar Castillo: Could you speak about the everyday programming and how it was tailored for them?**

**Lauren Carson:** For us, it's a lot of listening to the girls. [The girls] meet monthly. One girl who participated in the program previously oversaw that program, so that they had someone that was a little closer in age. Then we had two team members that would work with them. Then we also had board involvement as well. They would do monthly lunch-and-learns with our team and board members. Even outside of the junior advisory board, what our regular programming looks like, we have support groups that run in-person and virtually each week.

We just opened a community space in Brooklyn. This is our first opportunity to offer even more consistent programming. Most of our programming was monthly or quarterly. Now we're able to offer more weekly programming. We also work with schools, middle and high schools. We do 8-to-10-week programming with small groups, one a semester.

**Ambar Castillo: How are you selecting which schools you work with?**

**Lauren Carson:** Most of it is the schools coming to us. We have a certain number of schools and locations. Currently, we are able to offer school-based programming in New York and Atlanta, and then we recently licensed our curriculum to an organization in Chicago to be able to use it as well.

It's really word of mouth. We'll bring them in, and we'll do an assessment, and then we determine based on alignment, funding, strategy if we're able to get them in immediately, or if we need to work with them in a future semester.

**Ambar Castillo: A lot of your team is based in New York, and then you partnered out to Atlanta, or once you had enough participants who were based in Atlanta, that opened it up?**

**Lauren Carson:** We started in New York. I used to live in New York. I moved back to Atlanta, where I'm from, when we weren't too big, so we started offering our programming in New York and Atlanta. We were doing a lot of virtual work even before the pandemic, because of our size and capacity. Then, coming back from the pandemic, we developed a school-based curriculum model. We tested it in New York, and then we were able to expand it to Atlanta.

**Ambar Castillo: How did the feedback you got from participants affect how you structure sessions? What was their role in structuring or restructuring?**

**Lauren Carson:** It's feedback, not just from participants, but also from [others]. With our school-based programming, we're getting feedback from the teachers. We're getting feedback from the administrators on what is the best format. And we've modified that program quite a bit. We've really codified the workshops. Previously, we would talk to a school and draft the weekly sessions based on the needs of the specific school. We started to spot some trends—there were some workshops that landed a little bit better than others, and we were able to really package that.

Now we have a succinct curriculum that we run with schools. Previously, we did the facilitation internally. Now, we train outside facilitators so our team can focus on the coordination and logistics, and we bring in outside facilitators to go into the schools.

**Ambar Castillo: What was an example of a time where workshops didn't land as well, versus when they landed better? What was that process like in terms of determining what factors led to that?**

**Lauren Carson:** We look at a few different things. We look at what engagement looked like, what content knowledge looked like as well? One of the exercises we had, the girls had a little compact mirror they pulled out and they would say affirmations to themselves. We thought it was so cute. We thought this was going to land so well. The girls thought it was silly so we changed it.

We got the most feedback about that from the middle school program. I think the high schoolers also felt it was silly. They weren't as engaged as they were in some of the other activities, so we modified that where the girls are actually writing affirmations, and they're taking time to meditate on the affirmations. We tested that out. We normally shift things over a semester, and then we see what's landing, what's not landing.

We go into schools and share the standard sessions that we run and see if they feel it is aligned with their community. In most cases, they are. We also work with the administration to find out what are some of the concerns that they have. One of the things that we heard the most from administrators coming back from the pandemic was around peer relationships. That people were getting into fights, and just the way young people were talking to each other.

Something had shifted coming back from the pandemic. We built some sessions around peer relationships and engagement, and even relationships with parents and caregivers as well. Those are ones that were more brought up by administrators, but landed really well with the girls as well.

Coping skills, self-care methods, knowing when and where to access resources. Those are a lot of the things that we really focus on with the girls in our community.

**Ambar Castillo: Do you see your work within youth mental health fitting into the specific original categories—building resilience, giving agency, community and belonging? Do you feel your work resonates with one of these more than the other in terms of resilience, agency, and belonging**?

**Lauren Carson:** Belonging and resiliency, I would say, are the two that feel most closely aligned. Even outside of these cohort descriptions, we really like to say that our work is early intervention and prevention work. People normally understand that because a lot of people's knowledge on mental health care is around treatment and recovery. They're not as familiar with opportunities, particularly for Black girls, to learn about early intervention and prevention.

**Ambar Castillo: Are you having conversations with parents, caregivers, and other family members about the program? If so, how do those conversations go?**

**Lauren Carson:** Yes, definitely. That's why we use terms like early intervention and prevention, because a lot of times, people just think their child is going to therapy. And we do have options to refer their child to a therapist, but this is not therapy. This is an opportunity to really hone in and strengthen mental health tools in your toolkit.

Making sure, particularly for Black girls, that they understand healthy resilience, because something we hear very often in our communities is around resilience of Black girls and thinking that Black girls are so resilient, and we are, in many cases, but making sure that we're teaching our girls those healthy habits and tools, that you're not just focusing on others, but you're also able to focus on yourself.

**Ambar Castillo: When you design this curriculum and think about how the activities will help support that, are there certain areas of resilience that come up the most from you guys, from your partners, from the participants? For example, resilience in school or resilience in certain areas of their lives?**

**Lauren Carson:** We really focus on a few other things, and it depends on the age group, honestly. If it's middle school, we're really focused on teaching them about mental health language, understanding that mental health is connected to physical health, it's connected to spiritual health. It's a connector, and it's something that you really need to focus on. It's really laying that groundwork, particularly for younger students.

As we get a little bit older, when we get into high school, we're really focused on starting to help these young people have self-care methods and tools, and also recognizing that

a lot of us were not taught mental health, like coping skills and self-care methods, in the home.

In many cases, it's really pointing out a lot of the things that they're already using. Whether they participate in extracurricular activities or a sport, [we show them] how they can look at those activities as a way to support your mental health and not just playing a sport or participating in an activity or playing an instrument. These are things that you could really lean into when you're struggling with your mental health.

Then, what does it look like when you are struggling with your mental health? Outside of just the DSM, what does that really look like? Particularly for Black girls, because the research is so scarce on Black women and Black girls, and honestly, Black people [in general], when it comes to mental health. For instance, we'll educate them that Black girls and Black women have some of the highest rates of psychosomatic symptoms. Meaning, in many cases, these girls may be having headaches and have no idea that you have a headache because you're experiencing a lot of pressure or you're quite anxious about a test. Then what are some of the tools that we can then teach you? Maybe some breathing exercises that you can utilize right then and there to address some of the distress that you may be feeling.

For us, it's really equipping Black girls with the tools to stay mentally healthy and well, but also educating them with this digestible knowledge that's really relatable to their experiences.

**Ambar Castillo: Have you seen any changes in the narrative around mental health, maybe with certain popularized buzzwords like "self-care" and some of the things that are shown on social media? Have the narratives for any of those shifted?**

**Lauren Carson:** I definitely feel like things have shifted. We don't have to always provide a definition of self-care to our girls, but really getting into the nitty-gritty, after that surface stuff of getting them to think about basketball as self-care and not just putting on a song or a face mask or a spa day. It is getting them to think more expansively about some of these more popularized concepts pertaining to mental health.

I would say the other one that we work with girls on significantly is around boundaries. Boundaries is a term a lot of people know, but the best way to set them and enforce them, it's still a process. Yes, they have a better baseline understanding of mental health terminology, but getting into how some of these concepts can really show up in their lives is the part that I think that we're helping to make that connection for them.

**Ambar Castillo: How do you navigate that? If they already have these understandings of what self-care means, what the word boundary means, how do you help them understand a bit more within real-world situations and power dynamics that they're in?**

**Lauren Carson:** We make things interactive. While we may start with a definition, we're asking them to define it. We're asking them, "What do you think the definition is?" Getting them involved, getting an understanding of their baseline, even having individual exercises or activities.

I would say one of the most surprising, but also rewarding pieces of this work is in some cases, we just have to bring girls together. If we bring up a conversation around self-care, and then I ask them what are the different things that they like to do for self-care, they'll start naming it. Then the other girls are like, "Ooh, I'd like to do that too," or, "Oh, I didn't even think about that." Sometimes just creating space and giving them the opportunity to pour into each other as well.

**Ambar Castillo: What other major benefits do you see to that peer-to-peer structure?**

**Lauren Carson:** I think it's received better. Hearing it from a peer just hits a little different. It feels more relatable. Concepts can be grasped a little bit quicker than just teaching at someone and them not feeling like you've been there, you've done that, or you're in this situation now. Finding that balance between existing beyond just creating space, but then sometimes, what's necessary is just to create space for our community to be able to flow and pour into each other in that intentional way.

While we would love to have them all sitting around a lunchroom table talking about what they do for self-care, those conversations are still a little bit more rare. If anything, things are happening a lot on social media, so we need to make sure that we're also taking into account the platforms and the engagement that girls are utilizing.

**Ambar Castillo: I'm curious about their narratives on social media, whether they find it more helpful than harmful or vice versa. What are their perspectives?**

**Lauren Carson:** I would say the overwhelming feeling that we get from the girls when it comes to social media is that, yes, it could be helpful, but it also is quite harmful. So there's a dichotomy.

Also, research has also shown that Black girls don't feel like they're very protected online. It feels like another ecosystem that they have to navigate, where you have to take what is helpful to you, but you also have to flex that muscle of putting down what's not. That's the part that I think is quite difficult for a lot of young people, is to put down the piece that's not helpful for them.

They are finding support, they're finding information, they're finding strategies online, but they're also finding a lot of cyberbullying, and a lot of racial and gender bias, and hate, and discrimination.

**Ambar Castillo: How do they talk about those things, like discrimination and these biases, and some of these things that might be more abstract? Are they encountering it in certain comments?**

**Lauren Carson:** I think that it feels very commonplace for them because it's [not that different from] how a lot of people show up in person. Particularly, when it comes to black girls, if they'll be disrespectful online, they'll probably be disrespectful in person. Which I think is a little bit unique because I don't think that that's an overwhelming feeling by a lot of people.

The other part of it is, which I think is really unique about the time that we're in, we have a lot more language around some of the experiences that black girls go through. I can even speak about my childhood. I didn't really have the terminology of adultification and parentification.

I think that they're more aware of some of the experiences that they're having. I can speak for myself as a black girl. I didn't even know the way that people interacted with my body was impacting my mental health, or the ways that teachers and educators hold black girls accountable in ways that they don't necessarily hold other people accountable. Not everyone is aware of the things that are happening, but there's more language and more sharing around these experiences, where it doesn't always have to feel like, "Oh, I had this experience, but that probably means no one else did."

**Ambar Castillo: In a similar way, have you seen narrative from the girls around feeling empowered or that they have some agency to navigate at least turning off social media or checking out?**

**Lauren Carson:** Not really. We have a whole workshop, and we have some worksheets on the best ways to engage with social media in healthy ways, but it's tough. I think that that's one of the other things that comes up. I hear this from youth in general. I don't think it's just black girls. They're like, "This is an interesting place for society to be in where young people know more about something than adults do."

In the history of history, in most cases, adults know more about things than children do. That's a large part of society and the way that we engage with society. I think that they feel a little lost and want to look more to adults to set healthier boundaries. For example, all the stuff around no phones in schools, they're like, "Is that the solution? I'm pretty sure my teacher still has a phone."

**Ambar Castillo: That's right. In New York, they haven't found that the cell phone bans are necessarily helpful for their mental health.**

**Lauren Carson:** At all.

**Ambar Castillo: Oh, at all.**

**Lauren Carson:** That's what we're constantly hearing from young people in general—they want adults to be more invested in finding healthy ways to help them engage. Not just, "You can't have your phone" but, "Here are healthy ways to engage with it." Opposed to just the, "No, just don't do that," mindset.

**Ambar Castillo: Is the rationale around that like it's still going to happen, people are still going to find ways?**

**Lauren Carson:** Yes. It's not something that's going away. I think that that's where the collective feeling of loss is. They feel like [adults] don't have the answers. Not just that we are not doing the right things, but that we also don't have the answers of how to do this the right way.

**Ambar Castillo: What are the challenging aspects of having that peer-to-peer group experience? I know you mentioned some of the benefits of feeling like other people get it and have been through that, but are there any drawbacks?**

**Lauren Carson:** We've taught all of our facilitators that there are gentle ways to redirect and to provide the appropriate information, and making sure that we're thinking inclusively. Particularly here in Georgia, what comes up often is things around religion and faith and spirituality and how that comes into play with mental health. We have to find ways to affirm those that think it has nothing to do with it in the same breath as affirming those that think it has everything to do with faith and spirituality.

We have set some boundaries as an organization around not speaking about specific religions. Also, we have made a lot of progress, but we're stalled at this point when it comes to gender and identity. [Many] organizations are still trying to navigate that.

**Ambar Castillo: If a young person does find it helpful to talk about their experience with religion or certain kinds of spirituality, that it helps their mental health, are they welcome to talk about it? But you try to avoid people pointing their finger at certain religions?**

**Lauren Carson:** Yes. [Facilitators] can redirect at times. If someone reinforces a stereotype. Or, what comes up a lot of times, particularly when we work with parents and caregivers, are things around "respectability politics". There are generational tensions that I think are felt on all levels of society. It's the generational divide that young people do not want to do things in the same way, mainly because what we've been doing hasn't been working.

What we're seeing is that there's definitely a tension. We try to minimize the tension as much as possible in what we're teaching and how we're trying to empower girls, and the information that we're providing, but some of it is just deep-seated.

I remember during the holidays, another organization, called Justice for Black Girls, put out this whole post on all the things not to say to black girls during Thanksgiving dinner. When I saw it I thought, "Oh, this is so relevant," and then exactly some of the stuff that was on there happened at my family Thanksgiving. Someone asked my cousin when she was expecting a baby. The person who asked was 75 years old. There's this tension where you want to teach young people to advocate and to say, "Hey, that's not really something you ask. I'll let you know if I'm expecting." Also, "You're commenting on my weight. Why are you commenting on my weight?"

**Ambar Castillo: Do you find that the girls you work with feel that they have the agency to put a boundary there, if you know someone is asking an inappropriate question or crossing a boundary?**

**Lauren Carson:** It really varies. Some people feel comfortable saying something and others [don't]. We're teaching them what it looks like to journal later or step outside or to advocate for themselves. If you need something to make sure that you're taking care of your mental health in that moment when something difficult is said, even if you don't want to confront it. I remember reading one time, particularly with the civil rights movement, we celebrated all of these people who went against the grain, but it also was very heroic and scary to just go with the status quo. Those people had to cope in real ways, too.

Not everyone is prepared to take someone down. Even in that instance, I heard it after the fact, but I didn't go up to the person and say, "Hey, that's not the thing that you say." I did support my cousin and say, "How can you take care of yourself? I know that that was hurtful." Affirming her experience without feeling like you have to go step up to someone and say something now.

**Ambar Castillo: To zoom out a little bit, aside from funding, what are some of the challenges you have faced or are currently facing that you haven't yet been able to solve for?**

**Lauren Carson:** I would say resources, honestly, and training around this. There's a million books out there about starting a for-profit business, and you use The Lean Startup. There's three focused on nonprofits, but most of it is donor-based. We have people who we work with outside of just donors, but a lot of us don't have the resources to implement a Salesforce. Then you go to something like a HubSpot, and it's not really built for nonprofits. It's helping create more space for there to be the resources for people to actually thrive in this space.

So it's resources, it's training, but it's also opportunities to rest. One of the biggest gaps right now, particularly for nonprofit leaders, is around sabbatical grants. I felt like there was a shift, probably around 2022 or 2023, where more foundations were offering things like sabbatical grants, creating more opportunities for people to have some longevity in this space.

We know an executive director is going to be stressed and is going to have a million things on their plate, but what are the things that we can do to make that process easier? For me, a lot of times it's trying to figure out how to configure something that's not meant for a nonprofit to work for a nonprofit. How do I find AI tools and things like that that'll be best for us even though they are not really designed for us?

**Ambar Castillo: What would be helpful? If you were making the ideal support system, what would it look like?**

**Lauren Carson:** That is difficult. I would say [that funders] need to shine more light on mental health funding. And I feel like our funders are doing this, but not necessarily in

the way that I would like to see it. There is such a small bucket of mental health funding. I think, even globally, the statistic is that mental health funding is like 2% of all funding. Even as these large foundations like the Gates Foundation are looking to let all this money go, mental health isn't mentioned. I think the funders are very well positioned to advocate for more funding for our space so that the same people aren't all going after the same pots.

**Ambar Castillo: What are insights or teachable lessons from the work that you guys do that you think others could use?**

**Lauren Carson:** That mental health is connected to everything. Everyone, even if they're not "doing mental health work," they are doing mental health work at this point. If you are a STEM program, you're dealing with mental health work. If you are an empowerment program, you're dealing with mental health work.

We need to get to this place where mental health doesn't feel siloed, it feels more integrated and fluid within other societal issue areas. To me, that not only makes sense, but it benefits everyone.

**Ambar Castillo: Speaking of silos, you mentioned earlier some of your uniqueness is that you focus on black girls. Are you working or have you met other organizations that are also working with black girls and mental health in a different way that you found helpful in the community?**

**Lauren Carson:** There's another organization I mentioned that works at the intersection of social justice and does some mental health work called Justice for Black Girls. There's some other organizations that focus on women, and then girls are sometimes a part of that. But there aren't really organizations like ours that are just focused on mental health for black girls.

**Ambar Castillo: How do you continue to feel in community with other organizations, and learn from other organizations, if they're not really focused on what you guys are doing?**

**Lauren Carson:** For us, it's understanding that we're a part of an ecosystem. Yes, we serve black girls, but we also know that that means black women, that means schools, that means community centers. Really understanding that thread that goes through all of our work is so important for us. Understanding where communities overlap is really important for us as well. Those are some of the ways that we connect with other organizations. The communities usually overlap in some way, so we're able to find that through line between our work.

**Ambar Castillo: How would you define current attitudes around youth mental health, especially when it comes to black girls?**

**Lauren Carson:** I think we're at a stalemate at the moment. Maybe mid last year, SEL [Social and Emotional Learning] started to become a word that was a little bit not cool to say. It's not at the level of the dreaded DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion], but I think

we're a little bit stalled. What's been most revealing is that, [even though] we've been shown that having people globally understand that mental health is a top priority, if not the top priority, we see now that if something is going to get cut, it is mental health.

**Ambar Castillo: Why do you think that is? Why do you think you've seen the shift in social emotional learning no longer being cool to talk about in that way?**

**Lauren Carson:** I think what's revealing is that people did think that it was a bonus, that it was like a cherry on the cake opposed to the cake. That education as a social issue is the cake. A school that provides SEL support, that's a cherry. I think it's revealing that mental health has not been integrated in the ways that it needs to be, so that if funding shifts, even things like Medicaid being cut. We're talking about Medicaid being cut for low-income folks but we're not talking about the people being cut who are losing their mental health care.

**Ambar Castillo: Are there any other resources, guides or tools that have been especially helpful for you in advancing your work that we haven't discussed?**

**Lauren Carson:** I've found the deep cohort model to be really helpful. You mentioned earlier time and capacity. They do take a lot of time and capacity, but I've seen a lot of value in that model, particularly from a leadership perspective. I participated in the new profit mental health equity fellowship, and that was really transformative for me and for the organization.

We've been a part of a million different cohorts, but those deep cohorts where they're making you travel for three days and you can't schedule other meetings at all. I have found a lot of value in those.

**Ambar Castillo: Is there any question I haven't asked that you think the CoLab should be asking right now?**

**Lauren Carson:** Questions around something you helped me surface—that mental health is not integrated. How do we change that and make it so it is not just something that is optional at the highest-income private school, but also our public schools that are in the hood. That should be just as important as having a resource officer there or having a counselor there. As much money as y'all spend on these metal detectors, investing in mental health is just as important as these other societal issues that we're tackling. How do we make that happen?

**Ambar Castillo: Thank you so much, Lauren.**

*Ambar Castillo reports for Epicenter NYC, covering access and equity in some of the nation's most diverse neighborhoods. A former STAT health equity fellow through MIT's Knight Science Journalism program, her award-winning reporting bridges storytelling and public health. Supported by fellowships like the Solutions Journalism Network,*

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*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*