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Music

How K-pop Stars Are Leading Mental Health Conversations for AAPI People and Beyond

“I tend to think that depression is a natural thing rather than a bad thing,” GOT7 leader Jay B tells *Teen Vogue*.



BY JAE-HA KIM

MAY 30, 2022

Three years after she first began **struggling with self harm**, Emma* heard BTS member Jin's "Epiphany." She found herself sobbing when he repeated the line, "*I'm the one I should love.*"

"It felt like I was given permission to really care about myself more than anyone else, which isn't how I was raised," she says. "BTS have been so open about some of their own depression, but this song just hit me hard. And I began to see and hear that other idols were sharing really beautiful things about self care to fans. There was another singer who said he felt so alone that he wanted to be on a train that crashed. I have felt that way, too."

The musician she's referring to is **Woosung**. In a podcast last year on **Mindset**, The Rose frontman discussed his early days as a K-pop trainee in Seoul. He said he was under intense scrutiny and told to play the guitar better, that he had a weird vocal inflection when he sang, and that he needed to be more attractive than he already was. The Korean American musician developed an eating disorder. "I remember I would go to practice on a train," he said on his podcast. "I was like, I just really wish this train would crash. Everything could end. And it would just be easier – you know, I don't have to do it myself."

Like many Asian Americans, Emma says that when she was stressed about school, having relationship issues, or was inexplicably depressed, she dealt with her emotional turmoil by ignoring it.

"I just felt like I was alone and no one would understand me," says Emma, who's now in college. "I didn't have money for a therapist and felt like I would've been labeled as crazy by my parents if I went anyway. They were always so busy working and I didn't feel like I had the right to be depressed. They wouldn't have understood."

This feeling of helplessness combined with hopelessness is not uncommon for younger Asian Americans, experts say. Even those born in the United States may suffer from

unresolved cultural issues regarding mental health care that have been passed down through their families.

“Many older generations [of Asians] lived through war, authoritarianism, extreme poverty, and often view mental health as trivial,” says cultural anthropologist Joowon Park, who teaches at Skidmore College. “It is still considered a weakness and thus a taboo. However, the current generation faces a different set of challenges that could also lead to violence and suffering in everyday life, which we all need to recognize.”

K-pop Idols as Allies

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. Coincidentally, it's also Mental Health Awareness Month. And while the latter designation draws attention to the benefits of taking care of our overall well being, mental health care traditionally has been overlooked by Asians – a mindset that experts say has trickled down to Asian Americans.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, **AAPIs have the lowest rate of seeking help** of any racial or ethnic group. And research by the **National Latino and Asian**

American Study found that only 8.6% of Asian Americans sought out mental health services, compared to 18% of the general U.S. population. In Asian communities, there is still a stigma about treating mental health issues. Being depressed isn't seen as a *real* problem. And some Asians are wary of being **perceived negatively** if they do seek outside help.

The younger generation may not be suffering in the same way as their parents or grandparents, but they're dealing with the **real-life barrage** of **anti-Asian violence**, racial discrimination, and microaggressions about who they are. But they've found allies in K-pop idols, who have been opening up about their own struggles and how they're dealing with them.

"I think many years ago, there were a lot of people who didn't want to talk much about these issues," GOT7 leader Jay B says in Korean to *Teen Vogue*. "I didn't either. But as time went on, I realized that these were not a weakness or a defect, but rather something I experienced that is part of who I am today. I tend to think that depression is a natural thing rather than a bad thing. My job doesn't make me a special person [who's immune to feeling sad]. I feel the same emotions as any human being."

Park points out that K-pop idols like Jay B have the power to help establish a shared culture across the global community. Fans may want to learn more about mental health initiatives, but aren't sure where to start.

"K-pop stars' efforts to raise mental health awareness and the empathy from global fans allow us to recognize that some issues – such as cyberspace bullying, problematic ideals of masculinity and femininity, misogyny – are cross-cultural, extending beyond national boundaries," says Park. "The empathy and encouragement from fans as a result could be a source of rejuvenation, passion, and energy. [Music] companies have also realized that mental health is a global issue and that having their idols speak about mental health is not a minus to the business. The transparency could create more engagement from the fan base."

K-pop star AleXa – who recently won NBC's *American Song Contest* – says her relationship with fans is based on mutual support. Sometimes they reach out to her for

advice, because they have no one else they can turn to. They also feel comfortable with her, she says, because they know she faced her own issues being a minority who stuck out in her hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. And when she moved to Seoul to launch her music career, Koreans recognized right away that she was a biracial Korean singer who couldn't speak any Korean at the time.

“It's really good for fans to connect with artists on a personal level,”AleXa tells *Teen Vogue*. “And it goes both ways. What's really wonderful to see is that whenever an artist is going through a hard time, you read these articles announcing so-and-so is taking a break for their mental health and [the fans encourage it]. Taking a break was still a taboo not even too long ago. But things are changing.”

AleXa shares an anecdote about how her agency encouraged her to take time off after she injured her ankle. Compare this to how former Royal Pirates bassist James Lee said he was treated when his hand was nearly severed in a freak accident seven years ago. He went on a K-drama audition just weeks after his first surgery, because he had been told it would be good visibility for his band.

“It had been so conditioned in me to work through pain and never give up that I felt I had to go to the audition,” **James told me in 2019**. “When I didn't get the role, I felt like a failure. I wrote my suicide note, [which] eventually became my song ‘The Light.’ My friends and family were able to help me survive.”

Representation Matters

It's revelations like this that Brian Nam thought about when he, along with his older brothers Eddie Nam and the pop star Eric Nam, created **Mindset**. Rather than watching complacently as the western media continued to churn out the *dark side of K-pop* narratives, the Nams created a forum for K-pop idols – and other artists – to speak about whatever was on their minds. Stars like Jay B, Eric Nam, **Epik High's Tablo**, and Minnie from **(G)I-DLE** were provided a safe space to share their personal stories.

”Our media company wanted to create a little community where people around the world could congregate,” says Nam. “In our first year, we learned that people were drawn to real experiences, whether it was depression, anxiety, dating, or even relationships with their mothers. There was feedback that the audience wanted more of this kind of content about mental health experiences and challenges. It made them feel a little less alone.”

Like the majority of the DIVE staff, the featured artists on Mindset are predominantly Asian or Asian American – specifically Korean or Korean American. Mental health advocates say this kind of Asian presence is imperative when it comes to reaching ethnically Asian audiences.

“The buzz words these days are *representation matters*,” says Joy Lieberthal Rho, a New York-based psychotherapist who specializes in treating Asian American patients. “If you don't see it, you can't know how to be it. So it does matter that our kids, the children of Asia, see all permutations of people – the good, the bad, the ugly, the troubled, the saviors, the struggling, the victorious. Without seeing it and knowing others who look

and sound like them, it can feel super lonely. And loneliness is a terrible tax on the psyche and the body.”

Epik High frontman Tablo has been talking about his own mental health issues for the past dozen years. The hip hop star had endured a prolonged online smear campaign that included hundreds of thousands of netizens directing hate at him, his wife and their newborn baby.

“The only silver lining I could imagine was that hopefully through this, there would at least be some awareness,” he told me in February. “And once I proved myself as truthful and didn’t succumb to this and kill myself, hopefully people would see that it’s possible to defeat this.”

Tablo has been very open about this period in his life. He addresses it in his music (his 2011 solo album *Fever’s End* references the torment he went through), interviews, and two separate well-received podcasts. He followed up 2021’s *Mindset* with the 10-episode podcast *Authentic: The Story of Tablo* on iHeartRadio this year. Working through his trauma publicly didn’t lose him fans. If anything, he said it felt like he gained more.

“Fans often make more rational judgments about their idols than people think they do,” says Jeeheng Lee, a culture scholar at Seoul’s Chung-Ang University. “They understand that no one can be perfect. Therefore, just because their favorite idol confesses their personal issues, they don’t get instantly disappointed, shocked, or turn away. They care more about how those outside the fandom will judge such confessions. Most of the reasons why fans are reluctant about an idol’s personal issues are not due to moral standards or expectations within the fandom, but to the negative reputation that the idol might get from those outside it.”

I ask Jay B if he faced these fears as well. He says that fans who didn’t know about his bouts of depression were very sympathetic and expressed their best wishes for him. They didn’t abandon him.

“If you really need help, I think it’s right to talk about it,” he says. “In today’s society, it can be something that everyone is going through. So I think it would be nice to be a

person who can think about things comfortably and look ahead to the future.”

**Name has been changed.*

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