

## Daniela Williams

After graduating from UNC Greensboro with a double major in English and African American studies and a minor in psychology, DANIELA WILLIAMS started her career as an educator. For more than ten years she taught students of all ages from elementary school to college. Motivated by an encounter in her first year, she later shifted to mental health counseling.

“I noticed one of my students was always wearing long sleeves,” she says. “On a particularly hot day, I encouraged her to pull up her sleeves. She did and I saw cuts on her arms.” Williams gently asked the student to tell her about the marks. “And she opened up to me. That was the first seed.”

Other students came to Williams with their problems, despite redirecting them to professionals in counseling center. “They weren’t comfortable talking to anyone else,” she says. “I listened to them and didn’t pass judgement. I heard them without forming a solution. I saw how mental health struggles can impact a student’s ability to learn, and I realized I needed to pursue additional training to better support them.”

Williams completed a master’s degree in professional counseling at Liberty University and is now a licensed clinical mental health counselor. She opened **A Place of Solace** in 2019. Her areas of interest include depression, anxiety, infertility, postpartum depression and anxiety, parenting coaching, and pre-marital and marital therapy.

When thinking of a name for her practice, Williams says, “I asked myself, ‘What is it that I’m doing?’ I’m providing comfort, healing, and safety. If you’re not feeling safe, your walls are still up.” During the pandemic, Williams joined the Community Counseling Center in Wilmington.

“Working with a nonprofit allows me to see clients at a greatly reduced fee – sometimes as low as \$10,” she says. “There’s a great need to provide care to more patients who don’t have insurance.”

Williams explains the pandemic forced us to slow down and address issues like anxiety and depression. “We ignored it because life was so busy. But our health was failing because we weren’t attending to our needs,” she says. “Society tells us that your worth is tied to what you can produce. It starts as early as pre-k. I tell clients, ‘You matter because you’re matter.’”

As a Black counselor, Williams understands complex issues and stigmas surrounding therapy experienced by many minorities.

Researchers have often found a hesitancy toward therapy among Black people. “Some of this mindset is rooted in spirituality,” she says. “Women are told, ‘You need to pray more.’ Mental health isn’t the opposite of religion. You can use therapy and Jesus. Women, and in particular Black women, can’t be angry, and they can’t be soft, so they do it all and not complain.”

Williams teaches her clients to restructure these cognitions. She uses mindfulness, problem-solving, and

meditation to calm the body down before working on the mind. “If the body is at stress, there’s a constant battle,” Williams says. “I encourage women to advocate for their mental – and physical – health. In a safe space, you can be your authentic self.”