

# #BLACK MUSIC MATTERS

## “VICES”

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S.O.A.P.

### **LESSON OBJECTIVE(S):**

In this lesson students will begin a discussion on mental health and wellness using the song “Vices” by the Hip Hop group S.O.A.P. Students will gain background information on the issues affecting Black mental health in Canada. Students will then identify various internal and external pressures described in the song and compare them to the pressures in their own social context. Students will also discuss social conditions affecting mental health in Black communities while critically examining their own response to the song.

Subject specific activities in Music, Civics, History, Health & Phys Ed., English, Social Science, Visual Arts, and Dance will allow students to explore mental health supports available to Black people in Canada, creatively reflect on the song, and consider how political decisions can affect mental health for marginalized communities.

### **GRADE LEVEL:**

10 - 12



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# ADVANCE

CANADA'S BLACK MUSIC BUSINESS COLLECTIVE



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# LESSON CONTEXT

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In [Mental Health and the Black narrative – breaking down barriers](#), an article published on the Government of Canada website, outlines a variety of reasons why Black mental health has been underserved for generations in Canada. The unnamed author discusses a dismissal of mental health concerns within Black communities, driving the solution towards faith and prayer - a historical response dating back to before the slave trade. At the same time, “colonialism, oppression and racism” created conditions that increased strain on Black bodies and minds (Mental Health and the Black narrative, 2022). In the modern era, where a stronger examination of systemic injustice is occurring, equitable access to healthcare and mental health supports is still lacking for many Black Canadians. Additionally, with years of oppression creating a deep distrust in the healthcare system, there is often a gap in culturally relevant healthcare support, which creates further barriers to access.

Over the decades of Hip Hop history, several prominent artists have declared that Hip Hop music is their ‘therapy.’ While Hip Hop has created space for expression of emotions, it has often been one of a limited number of contexts in which it is okay for men to share their feelings. [A post-pandemic discussion of mental health further demonstrates the risks](#) to Black men’s mental health as lockdowns removed other ‘acceptable’ contexts for emotional expression like the gym, sports, and social events. This has led to Black people suppressing their feelings, while “in a constant state of anxiety” because “Black people, especially Black men, don’t have the privilege of being able to express all of our emotions, especially anger. Black men have to spend their lives managing and suppressing their feelings in order to avoid being seen as difficult, aggressive or threatening to others.” (CBC, 2021)



Student writing in notebook. Photo: Brad Neathery



## ABOUT S.O.A.P.

S.O.A.P. (Scribe and Onglish Aren't Perfect) is a rapper / producer duo consisting of poet & emcee Scribe and producer Onglish. The two began a creative partnership while working on Scribe's first album *Origins*. Their self-titled debut album, released in 2020, came from a creative friendship that pushed their music to become a single minded effort, rather than just matching bars to beats. Both artists have a long history of working with youth as arts educators in Southern Ontario.

## ABOUT "VICES"

"Vices" begins with a sample from Scribe's poem "You Are My Ghost." In it, Scribe discusses an emotional connection with his father, despite their physical distance and rocky relationship. "Vices" uses this inspiration to discuss the influence of vices in Scribe's life. In verse 1, Scribe reflects on his grandfather's funeral and his attempt to numb the pain by using substances. In verse 2, Scribe describes mental health struggles and coping mechanisms of workaholic and suicidal ideation. In verse 3, Scribe discusses violence on the streets of Toronto and the social conditions that influence it. Scribe adopts the voice of Black communities and decries their vilification through the media and political figures. In each verse, Scribe exposes a variety of personal and social situations that can negatively affect the mental health of Black people.



Candle Light. Photo: Mike Labrum

## CONTENT WARNING

Verse 2 of this song contains a brief discussion of suicidal ideation. You may consider omitting these lines from verse 2 as it will not compromise the message of the song:

*When I walk over bridges rails looking like lines of scrimmage  
I crank my headphones to max screaming lyrics to block the image  
That's my body dropping Gardiner traffic isn't stopping  
Crush a car hood to my coffin but I choose the better option*



# FOUNDATIONAL ACTIVITIES

## PRE-ACTIVITY

### 1. WATCH THE VIDEO (2:30)

[Toronto Hip Hop artist Akintoye channels mental health into TikTok hit](#) (Canadian Press)

### 2. READ THE ARTICLE (15:00)

[Mental Health and the Black narrative – breaking down barriers](#) (Government of Canada)

As a class, identify any information that is new or unknown

### 3. REVIEW KEY VOCABULARY (10:00)

Review the Key Vocabulary List

Read through the lyrics to “Vices” (Appendix 1)

Re-read the lyrics again if needed

### 4. LISTEN TO “VICES” (4:00)

Answer the following discussion questions

## KEY VOCABULARY

**Autonomous** - not controlled by others or by outside forces; independent in mind and judgment

**Bust** - fire a gun

**Caught a Body** - a killing; a dead body

**Clap** - the firing of a gun

**Constellations** - a group of visible stars forming a pattern or recognizable object

**Cap a Shotty** - buy a shotgun

**Don** - a highly respected person, often in organized crime

**Dukes** - authority figures

**Gentrify (Gentrification)** - a process in which a poor area of a city gets an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents

**Go buck** - to act wildly, in celebration or anger

**Hammers** - a part inside a gun that makes the gun fire

**Knuckle up** - preparing to fight

**Let it bang** - fire a gun

**Nug** - a bud of marijuana

**Ominous** - Menacing or threatening; a concern that something bad is going to happen in the future

**Oozaru** - a character from the anime Dragonball Z, a Great Ape

**Strap** - a gun

**Tekken 2** - an arcade fighting game

**Tweak** - to ‘freak out,’ to act with extreme emotion; or, to be under the influence of methamphetamine

**Vice** - a practice or habit considered to be evil, degrading, or immoral

**Yute** - Caribbean slang for a youth or young person

Definitions from [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](#), [Oxford Learner's Dictionaries](#) and [Urban Dictionary](#)



# DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

## QUESTIONS

**What is the significance of the line “Watch me smile all picture perfect cracking jokes like nothing hurts?”**

(i.e., Scribe is describing a mask he uses to hide the pain he is feeling. He is grieving the loss of his grandfather and doesn't feel like he has life together, but instead of facing the pain he is smoking marijuana and drinking with his friends. This reflects the variety of ways people hide their pain, including: overwork, deflecting through humour, people pleasing, being overly positive or numbing the pain through drug use)

**What pressures is Scribe facing in Verse 2? What stressors (or challenges) do teenagers face?**

(i.e., Scribe discusses overworking, not taking care of his body, feeling lonely, being isolated from family, suicidal ideation, and poor familial role models; answers may vary as students describe the variety of challenges they face)

**What social situations that negatively affect the mental health of Black people does Scribe highlight in Verse 3 of “Vices?” Of his perspectives, which do you agree or disagree with?**

(i.e., Scribe describes gun violence, anger that leads to violence, overly violent policing, media misrepresentation of Black youths, gentrification & negative societal beliefs about Black people; Students should be able to articulate Scribe's opinion and then express whether they agree or disagree. This will lead to opportunities to research to expand their understanding)



Motivational Street Signs. Photo: Dan Meyers



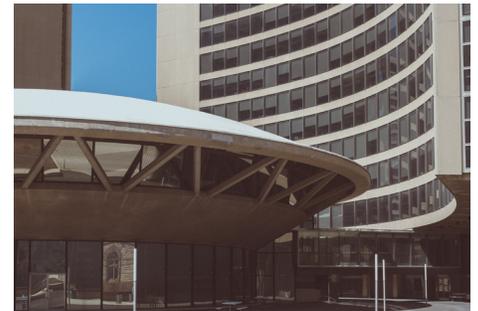
# SUBJECT-RELATED ACTIVITIES

## MUSIC

- Write your own Hip Hop verse that addresses a particular aspect of mental health (either something experienced or observed) (150:00)
  - Using YouTube, choose an instrumental track to perform your verse. Discuss your choice of instrumental and how it fits your lyrics (75:00)

## CIVICS/HISTORY

- As a class, examine a public statement on gun violence from one current or past Mayor of Toronto. Compare the statement to Scribe's perspective presented in the song
  - Then, individually or in small groups, research any public statements on gun violence from one of your municipal or provincial government officials. What perspective(s) are present? How do they compare to the statement from the Mayor of Toronto? How do they compare to Scribe's message? (110:00)



City Hall, Toronto. Photo: Matt Hanns Schroeter

## HEALTH & PHYSICAL EDUCATION

- Select one (1) of the agencies from this list: [Toronto For All: Anti-Black Racism & Mental Health Resources](#). Review their website to learn about what that agency is doing to address Anti-Black Racism in healthcare. Identify the specific programs or services they have to support Black Mental Health. Finally, discuss the rationale for these programs. Prepare a slideshow to share your findings. (265:00)



## ENGLISH

- Write a compare and contrast paragraph using “Vices” and another song that discusses mental health challenges for Black people. (190:00)
- Use the articles provided to write a poem or spoken word piece about healthy coping strategies for teenagers. (225:00)
  - [Mental Health and the Black narrative – breaking down barriers](#) (Government of Canada)
  - [The pandemic, combined with a racial reckoning, weighs heavily on Black men’s mental health](#) (CBC)

## SOCIAL SCIENCES

- Review the article [Mental Health and the Black narrative – breaking down barriers](#) (Government of Canada). For each of the five headings in the article, identify one key idea and connect it to key concepts from the major Social Science theories. Share your work with a partner or in a group. (225:00)

## VISUAL ARTS

- Create an art piece that is inspired by a lyric from “Vices” (190:00)

## DANCE

- Choose one of the verses from “Vices” and choreograph a dance to represent it. Explain your stylistic choices. (225:00)



Poster Street Art. Photo: Jazmin Quaynor



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# LESSON RESOURCES AND LINKS

[Toronto Hip Hop artist Akintoye channels mental health into TikTok hit](#) (Canadian Press)

[Mental Health and the Black narrative – breaking down barriers](#) (Government of Canada)

[The pandemic, combined with a racial reckoning, weighs heavily on Black men’s mental health](#) (CBC)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[Black MENTAL Health: 4 tips to promote wellness](#) (Psychology Today) - additional discussion on supporting Black mental health, particularly for men

[Changing the tune on tortured artists and musicians’ mental health](#) (CBC) - additional, Canadian musicians trying to speak to the issue of Black mental health

Scribe - [“You Are My Ghost”](#) (BAM Toronto Youth Poetry Slam) - full version of Scribe’s poem that is sampled in “Vices”



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# APPENDIX 1

## “VICES” LYRICS

### INTRO – SAMPLE FROM SCRIBE’S POEM “YOU ARE MY GHOST”

You and I are similar  
Constellations sharing a few of the same stars  
Knowing that sometimes in the circle of life  
We must look to one another to remember who we truly are

### VERSE 1

Two years since my Grandpa Sunny met his sunset  
I was out in Mexico poolside keeping my feet wet  
Came back for the funeral seen a nug in his casket  
Hours later me and my cousins smoking and laughing  
Rarely do I use for pleasure, drink more when I’m under pressure  
Lately I’ve been working on it, tryna keep my shit together  
Not really addiction, it’s a problem I can fix it  
Watch me smile all picture perfect cracking jokes like nothing hurts

### CHORUS

I got your vices in my DNA  
I got your vices in my DNA, yeah I checked  
I bet my life that we won’t be the same  
I bet my life that we won’t be the same, yeah I bet

### VERSE 2

I been working all week, I get home and can’t sleep  
If it’s not an early morning I wake up and can’t eat  
Work ethic way strong, motivation mad weak  
Man my body at its limit but I know I can’t tweak  
Different moods for dark days, different gigs the same fee  
Skin like coal when under pressure, cause these diamonds ain’t cheap  
I been feeling lonely lately, haven’t seen my family  
Take a visit, go to see ‘em they don’t understand me

When I walk over bridges rails looking like lines of scrimmage  
I crank my headphones to max screaming lyrics to block the image  
That’s my body dropping Gardiner traffic isn’t stopping  
Crush a car hood to my coffin but I choose the better option



Jane and Dundas, Carvela said I'm not allowed to die  
Never thought I'd see the day one of my students saved my life  
By the time you're reading this your favourite Scribe will have a wife  
Pain is dark as winter nights I'm tryna live to see the light  
Men that came before me weren't monogamous, vows were  
Broken promises sometimes marriage scares me task is ominous  
Friend requests with same last names but they anonymous  
I'm praying from my blood that I'm autonomous

### CHROUS

I got your vices in my DNA  
I got your vices in my DNA, yeah I checked  
I bet my life that we won't be the same  
I bet my life that we won't be the same, yeah I bet

### VERSE 3

The city way too hot this summer, bullets rain like  
Beads of sweat it's like an Oprah giveaway this summer  
You caught a body, he'll catch a body they'll  
Cop a shotty let it bang and ain't nobody sorry  
Streets caught amnesia ain't nobody knuckle up  
Tucking tails between they legs and let that anger bubble up  
They be egging on his temper he a Bronco he go buck  
He gon' pack a strap that's gonna sonic boom soon as he bust  
You got rage like Ozaru wanna brawl like Tekken two  
Takes back to when disrespect made me go gorilla too  
You want don respect with the temperament of a yute  
I don't blame you at all when cops wanna move like abusive dukes

Racist media and mayor gon' treat our dead like they pawns  
Never forget when cops put they hands on the homie John  
Removing supervision for all the times they do wrong  
Removing programs and then placing blame on our songs  
They see drugs and the dealings  
Shootings stabbings and killings  
Leave it to the masses they gon' paint us all as villains  
Even when the victims is children they blame civilians  
Gentrifying neighbourhoods to buy us out the buildings  
But we more than that, more than hammers set to clap  
We the northern renaissance that put the city on the map  
They try to dash us 'weh we here to stay Father I pray  
You help us heal while you reveal these wicked ways  
Fam hear me say



**CHROUS**

I got your vices in my DNA  
I got your vices in my DNA, yeah I checked  
I bet my life that we won't be the same  
I bet my life that we won't be the same, yeah I bet