

Not a crime, but an illness: Black folk and depression

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
Monday, 19 January 2009 14:08

Words cannot contain my admiration for Terrie Williams, a sister who has put her pain on “front street” with her book, *Black Pan – It Just Looks Like We Aren’t Hurting* (Schribner, 2008). In this book, Williams reminds all of us that depression is not a crime, but an illness.

Her foundation, the Stay Strong Foundation (www.staystrongfoundation.com) has been committed to lifting up the matter of depression and teaching us to treat the illness as just that, a source of healing, not of shame.

This week, while the nation is enraptured in inaugural euphoria, Williams and her organization are a stark reminder that life goes on. On Thursday, Jan. 15, on Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, she held an event in New York that focused on the issue of depression – what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like. There’s an Internet video that gives you a taste of the movement -- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aU4I-zJGos&feature=channel_page -- and an indication of the folk who are supporting it.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, Susan Taylor, Ruby Dee, Mo’Nique, Jeff Johnson, Terrie McMillan and others are among those lifting their voices to encourage Black people to explore their pain.

Terrie says that some of our depression is a function of our slave legacy. We had to hold it in – our affection, our pain, our disappointment, because feeling allowed others to exploit our weakness.

We did not show affection, even, to our children; for fear that they would be sold away from us. That holding in has been passed down to the point when some Black folks believe that you can pray your way out of a clinical condition. To be sure, prayer works, but sometimes prayer works with therapy, medication, or recognition.

Terrie Williams is candid about her own depression and the ways she handled it. She is extremely transparent about her resistance to therapy, to medication, and the ways that she felt she could fix her illness herself.

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And then she is candid about her path to health and healing, and in her book she shares that path with others. Additionally, she interviews others who care to be candid and transparent about their stories, and through their voices, she gives other people permission to own and acknowledge their own pain and ways to heal it.

This is a good time to talk about depression and pain, especially as the economy inflicts external pressures on all of our well being. With an unemployment rate recently reported at 7.2 percent, or 11.9 percent for African Americans, we know that the “real deal” is about 13.5 percent for the overall population (since we don’t count those folk who stopped looking for work, or those who work part time and really want to work full time), and about 20 percent (or 1 in 5) for African Americans.

That’s enough to make the strongest person discouraged, especially if she is one of the ones out of work, or facing economic challenges. That external trigger may make a person sad, angry, frustrated, and even frightened. And then it might also tip someone over the edge to depression. Williams would suggest looking at both the internals and the externals.

How much of your reaction is “about you”? How much is about external conditions? Can you separate them?

Rich folk are killing themselves because they can’t face the consequences of poor investments. They can’t imagine life without means. The mythology of African American resilience suggests that we don’t kill ourselves over money. The mythology is partly right. The suicide rate of African Americans was 5.25 per 100,000 people, compared to 10.75 per 100,000 people for whites. We are half as likely to kill ourselves as white folks are. Still, an unfortunate reality is that we attempt suicide almost as frequently as white people do, with about 4.1 percent of African Americans attempt suicide, compared to 4.6 percent of whites. And while history and stigma may prevent older African Americans from considering, attempting, or completing suicide, suicide was the third leading cause of death of young African Americans, those 15-24.

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Ouch! We may wear that thing Terrie Williams calls the “game face,” but the data say that we are hurting.

Terrie Williams has given us permission to explore the sources of our pain. She has forcefully asserted that depression is not a crime, but an illness, nothing to be ashamed of, something to claim. Her Stay Strong Foundation is a resource, and her January 15 event was but one of a series of actions she plans to empower those in pain. So if you are hurting, get help. Terrie Williams is among those who will make sure it is available.

Julianne Malveaux is president of Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, N.C. She can be reached at presoffice@benett.edu.