Deconstructing Myths and Addressing Realities of Suicidal Behavior in the African American Community

Engagement in the Black Community Summit

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile…….

* Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906)

Black Pain – Starting the Conversation
Deconstructing Myths and Addressing Realities of Suicidal Behavior in the African American Community

Important Takeaways from “Black Pain” Video

- Hardest three words, “How are you?”
- Black pain is ‘normalized’. We don’t know what it looks, sounds or feels like.
- “Can’t show a ‘kink in the armor’”
- Internalized and Externalized Depression
- Wearing the ‘mask’.
- It just looks like we’re not in pain.

Learning Objectives

This is a beginning to intermediate level training. Upon completion of this seminar, the attendees will be able to

1) List at least three risk and protective factors for suicidal behavior among African Americans.
2) Identify at least three resources within the community that encourage help-seeking behavior.
3) Articulate the importance of accessing culturally responsive care for 1) historically marginalized persons and 2) for persons who attach a stigma to receiving mental health therapy.

Where do we start the conversation?

Myth busting – Black people die by suicide

- In 2019, suicide was the for blacks or African Americans, ages 15 to 24. second leading cause of death
- “The Covid-19 pandemic increased many of the risk factors associated with suicidal behavior (adverse mental health conditions, substance misuse, and job or financial stress), with young adults and black and Hispanic persons affected more than other demographic groups.”
- Between 1991 and 2017, suicide attempt among black adolescents increased by 73% (Lindsey, 2019)
- “Actual suicide death rates for Black American girls ages 13 to 19 increased by 86%” (from 2001 to 2017, according to a 2019 study published in the “Journal of Community Health” (Time Magazine, 2021).”
- Young people of color — notably Black people between the ages of 15 and 34 and Hispanic people between the ages of 25 and 34 — saw double digit increases in suicide rates in 2020
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Definition: Suicide

- **Suicide** – Death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of the behavior.
- **Suicide** – A purpose-driven behavior designed either to eliminate or manage unbearable levels of pain in one's current life circumstances.

Suicide (cont’d)

- “Suicide is the result of an untimely convergence of multiple psychiatric, psychological, social, relational, environmental, occupational, cultural, medical, academic stressors that severely challenges an individual's capacity to cope.” (Edwin Shneidman quote taken from *Suicide & Psychological Pain*, Klott, 2012)

Cheslie Kryst
Miss USA 2019
Licensed Attorney
Television Special Correspondent
Beautiful
Talented
Loving Family
High Achieving
High Functioning Depression?
Reactions to the Death of Cheslie Kryst

- "In her private life, she was dealing with high-functioning depression, which she hid from everyone — including me, her closest confidant — until very shortly before her death," said Kryst’s mother, April Simpkins.
- She seemed so happy. She didn’t fit the mold of someone who dies by suicide.
- “I’ve been searching my brain thinking, ‘What did I miss? What did I not see?’” CBS This Morning host Gayle King, who was a mentor and friend to Kryst, told TIME, recalling a final conversation the two shared in December. “How could I miss the signs? There were no signs. That’s the truth.”

What is “High Functioning Depression”?

1. The Term ‘High-Functioning’ Reflects Harmful Stereotypes About Depression
   - People who know they struggle with HFD often feel like they have to "prove" their illness to others because they don’t fit the stereotypical picture of the depressed person.
   - Many people don’t seek help because they don’t think their depression is severe enough to warrant help.

2. People With High-Functioning Depression Need Support, Too
   - People with high functioning depression typically feel depressed most of the time for years on end.
   - People with functioning depression may hold down a steady, successful job, always look well put-together in public, and “not seem sad.”
   - While depression can be successfully treated no matter how severe it is, treatment is often most effective when started early.

3. Depression Doesn’t Have Predictable “Stages”
   - Depression isn’t a progressive illness with a predictable outcome, and there are no set stages for depression as there are in other diseases such as cancer

4. Depression, Even if High-Functioning, is a Risk Factor for Suicide
   - Depression is known to raise one’s risk of suicide — and even if someone is high functioning, they’re still at risk.

5. Not All People Who Die by Suicide Show Warning Signs
   - It’s hard even for experts to predict with certainty which people with depression or other mental health concerns will have suicidal thoughts or behaviors.
Common Signs of **High Functioning Depression**

- For one thing, they have a loss of interest in daily activities, which is one of the primary criteria for a depression diagnosis.
- Changes in eating and/or sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue
- Feeling lazy but also feeling incapable of doing more than you're already doing
- Feelings of guilt
- Hopelessness
- Imposter syndrome, feeling like you are “faking it” when you accomplish things
- Indecision
- Irritability
- Low self-esteem
- Sadness
- Tired all the time even if you sleep
- Worthlessness

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**5 Ways to Cope with High Functioning Depression**

1. Anti-depressants or other medications
2. Exercise including yoga and low-impact cardio
3. Nutrition changes especially limiting sugar, caffeine, and alcohol
4. Reducing screen time and limiting media
5. Therapy including cognitive behavioral therapy and talk therapy

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**African Americans and Mental Health**

https://www.rheedawalkerphd.com

Navigate an Unequal System, Learn Tools for Emotional Wellness, and Get the Help You Deserve by Dr. Rheeda Walker
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Can’t Show a Kink in the Armour

- **Black Men**
  - ‘Playing it Cool’ aka ‘Aloof Swagger’
  - Internalized views of masculinity, resistant to traditional forms of therapy

- **Black Women**
  - Superwoman Syndrome
  - Emotions are put to the side because there’s an expectation of ‘I have to be strong’.

Black Women and Suicide

- Suicides among Black women rose 40% from 2015 to 2020.
- For Black teen girls, the increase is 81% in those five years.
- Black people overall are less likely to get treatment, even when they're depressed.
- Even for populations who do have access to care, there's still the stigma.

Protective and Risk Factors for Suicide African Americans

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protective Factors</th>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion/Spirituality</td>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Acceptance/Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>Low Private Regard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Family/Social Support</td>
<td>Social Isolation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intact Marriages</td>
<td>Divorced/Separated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to Culturally Responsive Care</td>
<td>Lack of Access to Care</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Old Age”</td>
<td>Youth</td>
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<td>Racism</td>
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The Importance of Culturally Responsive Care

- Interventions that are culturally responsive, use trauma-informed principles. These interventions address within group differences, intersectionality and hold the most promise for effective care.
- These interventions expand the treatment lens to include churches, beauty salons, barbershops, etc. to promote access to care.
- Therapeutically addressing racism is a building block towards healing trauma.
- Destigmatizes help-seeking behavior and makes it okay to say, “I’m not okay.”

Black Pain – Having the difficult conversation, healing through sharing your story

- We promote Hope
- We are helping to change lives by:
  - increasing suicide awareness
  - encouraging families to talk more and text less
  - destigmatizing mental illness
  - partnering with universities, churches and diverse community and professional organizations

What resulted from having this conversation?

www.ashleyjadinefoundation.org
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In 2020, rates of suicide death had decreased — except among Black people.

Stigma around mental illness permeates the Black community.

Having candid discussions about the importance of prioritizing mental health and all the factors that could help lower the rates of suicide and end the mental health stigma.

Having access to culturally responsive mental health care is crucial to improving physical and mental health in Black communities.

Open and honest discussions about the truth of suicidal ideation and its prevalence in Black communities are crucial, as many individuals keep their experience to themselves, fearing judgment.

Conclusion

• Create safe environments to keep the conversations going
• Strengthen access to culturally responsive healthcare and mental health care
• Offer community programs and services in non-traditional places such as barbershops, especially in marginalized communities
• Educate ourselves about suicidal ideation, signs to look for, and how to respond to pain.

Online Culturally Responsive Resources

• Therapy for Black Girls
• The Loveland Foundation
• Black Emotional and Mental Health (BEAM)
• Ethel's Club
• Black Men Heal