

Ain't Nobody Blues Like a Black Woman's Blues

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Abstract

Historically, black women have had to bear challenges in the United States of America. They have been labeled as the “Strong Black Woman” who are able to carry the world on their shoulders. Sometimes, they are even referred to as the “Mule” of their community.

Depression is a mental health illness that has no respect of person. It is believed that nearly 19 million people suffer yearly from this chronic illness, resulting in people not being able to go work and performing poorly on their job.

Women are 50 % more likely than men to suffer from depression. Statistically, black women are said to suffer the most from depression. Yet, they are the least likely to be diagnosed and properly treated. The million dollar question is why is this the case? This article is written to shed some light on this topic and provide some coping strategies for black women who are battling with depression.

Keywords: African American Women; Black; Depression

The plight of black women

It is no secret that black women have had to fend for themselves. Since slavery, black women have been placed in very vulnerable positions where their bodies were not their own. They were systematically brutally raped by their slave masters. They suffered the agonizing terror of having both their husband and children taken and sold into slavery. However, they were often told to “suck it up and drive on”.

These types of atrocities have played a significant role in the black woman's psyche today. DeGruy [1] spoke about intergenerational traumas in which she refers to as Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome are thoughts or behavior patterns that impacts one's self-esteem as a result of repeated societal racist views, actions, and or the adoption of racist colonist beliefs, such as white people are superior and black people are inferior. Institutionalized racism, whether it is overt or covert, leaves a person feeling angry or self-defeated. It can take an emotional toll on a person leaving them robbed of both their hopes and aspirations in life. This sort of prolonged cruel and unjust treatment will result in mental duress or stress.

Slavery, Jim Crow, and modern-day institutionalized racism are all systems of oppression which has greatly impacted black women. Due to these continual acts of racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, many black women are made to feel powerless. As a result, they will abandon their own way of life and submit to the dominant culture just so they can survive [2].

Black women have been even portrayed in the media as women who were less than human. They are often thought of as having no feelings or emotions. If by chance, they were given the opportunity to express their emotions, they were seen as the “angry black women”. Rarely is a black woman viewed as an individual with feelings and needs or as a woman who is using the only thing she has, which is her voice to be recognized as a human being. She is often silenced and told this is just the way life is.

According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden [3], they describe “shifting” as a person who has to intentionally change their outer behaviors, attitudes, or vocal tones to appease the dominant culture at the expense of their own race, class, and culture. These researchers believe this happens when black women are having to live and function in an oppressed system which openly promotes gender and racial biases against black women. Over time, this kind of behavior diminishes wholeness for black women.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden [3] goes farther to talk about a coping mechanism black women succumb to known as the “Sisterella Complex”. The Sisterella Complex is when black women are attempting to be the strong black women and carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Even though they are suffering from depression, they learn how to operate in their depression. The new normal for these women is really functional depression. Black women feel a strong sense of culture obligation to appear as if they got it all together whereas in reality they are falling apart on the inside. They are screaming for help, but no one can hear them because they refuse to let anyone know they are wearing a mask. Since black women suffer in silence, their depression often goes undiagnosed by a healthcare professional. The strong black woman has become a master at shifting by being talented, hardworking, and selfless in their actions. Yet, these black women are in need of emotional maintenance overhaul. They are literally operating on emotional emptiness and have been for quite some time.

Beauboeuf-LaFontant [4] interviewed several women who spoke about how their mothers socialized them to carry the mantle of being a strong black woman. Overall, the mothers believed they were preparing their daughters to be able to function in a racist oppressed society which did not value them. Therefore, their cultural scripts were such things as “do not let people see you cry” or “you cannot let the things of this world bother you”. In many ways, this was informing young black girls who grew up to be women that there is a need for them to keep their emotions tucked away and there is no time to be depressed. The black mothers teach this to their young black daughters as a survival strategy on how to live in society.

Rarely do you see a black woman crying concerning her emotional instability. If for some reason she is, she is often told to “dry her weeping eyes and get on with the business of today”. Due to the messages instilled into black women such as “you do not have time to feel sorry for yourself” and “you have to be strong,” black women do not get to actually experience their emotions because of this internal dialogue. The black woman is not given the luxury to distinguish when she is really just feeling down, or she is actually suffering from depression. These internal voices such as “nothing is wrong with you,” “you need to pull self-up,” and “you are just being lazy” are deeply embedded and can result in black women suffering from depression.

The black community and mental health

There is a stigma around mental illness within the black community. Mental illness is often associated with being “crazy”. The black community sees a person as “mentally weak” when they begin to express or show signs and symptoms of mental illness. Mental illness is highly frowned on in the black community and is considered to be taboo, leaving the black communities without a safe place to discuss their inner most feelings. Specifically, black women are left alone to suffer in silence. They are often reluctant to share with others their true feelings. Black women are even afraid to ask for help feeling like they might be stigmatized or made to feel ashamed [5,6].

Most individuals within the black culture depend on their religion, combined with their own strength, to cope with life stresses. When they are in distress, it is not uncommon for them to rely on their spiritual strength hoping to pray those feelings away. The black community has a strong spiritual influence in their communities. The church has always been the bed rock of the community. This is where the community goes to worship, socialize, conduct community meetings, and tackle the social ills of their communities. So, it is not surprising for black women to seek comfort and refuge in what is familiar to her culture and the church. Not understanding depression, a black woman may believe that through prayer she will feel better when in actuality she does not. The black woman then begins to tell herself she is not strong or she simply does not trust God enough. She also has to deal with others telling her “if only she would just leave her problems at the altar, in the hands of God,” and “there is no problem God cannot solve”. This provokes dissonance within a black woman and she is often left to suffer in silence [5-7].

In 2009 Beauboeuf-Lafontant, inspired by the work of Jack [8], introduced the term “the silencing paradigm” to describe the experiences of strong black women who are suffering from depression. According to this paradigm, women often express feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and a loss of pleasure in those things they once enjoyed. Their daily routine can become a challenge for them, resulting in becoming socially withdrawn and experiencing feelings of fatigue. Black women can often experience a mourning of themselves based on societal norms and belief. This results in dealing with the triple jeopardy of being black, a woman, and feelings of depression, which can be a heavy burden to bare that farther pushes her down into the deep blue sea of depression.

Depression

Depression is defined as a long-term profound feeling of hopelessness and low self-esteem. The mental health professionals refer to this type of depression as major or clinical depression. Clinical depression can have one feeling a lack of energy and limited hope to even want to continue to live. This can often last for weeks or months and can be recurring.

About 15 percent of people who are diagnosed with depression commit suicide. When an individual is depressed, that can cost millions of dollars in lost of productivity each year. There is no price tag you can put on the toll it takes on a person self-esteem and their personal relationships [9].

It has been reported annually over 19 million adult Americans are impacted by depression [10]. Agency for Health Care Policy and Research revealed health care providers are least likely to diagnosis people suffering with depression. Depression greatly impacts ones social and physical capacity [10].

In today's society, women are more prone than men to suffer with depression. Depression among women has been labeled the most significant mental health risk especially for younger women of childbearing and child rearing age [11]. Approximately 30 to 50 percent of the time, depression is misdiagnosed with women. 70 percent of the time the antidepressant prescribed for women are improperly diagnosed and monitored. This is critical since women have more incidents of improper usages of prescription medications compared to men [12,13].

Dabquah [14], speaks about depression in her book *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Women's Journey Through Depression* that everyone experiences days in their lives when it is difficult to pull ourselves together. Those moments can trigger sadness and many depressive thoughts. When this sort of depression comes, individuals are able to shake it off at the end of day or they can spend time with their loved ones and they will cheer them up. In contrast, there is this full-blown clinical depression that no matter what someone do, they cannot shake it off. It often lingers for days, months, and even years. An individual simply cannot just snap out of it, and no amount of will power can be helpful to pull through these darken moments of life. Individuals are desperately feeling worthless and helplessness.

There are several factors in a black woman's life that makes her much more susceptible to mental and emotional stresses - economic insecurity, caregiver responsibilities, neighborhood violence, and a lack of social support and physical illness or disabilities. Due to these stresses, many black women are prone to suffer with tension, anxiety, worrying, and fear, which in term put black women at a greater risk of chronic stress and anxiety that is dangerous and fatal to their health [15-17].

Black women and depression

Black women are more likely than then their white counter parts to suffer from depression. Black women are twenty percent more likely to report having serious psychological distress then white men [18].

Black women are at a higher risk of being exposed to lower socioeconomic risk factors, which lead to depression. For example, black women experience racial/ ethnic discrimination, daily macroaggressions, lower education level, income segregation where they are placed into low status and high-stress jobs, unemployment, poor health, larger family size, marital dissolution, single parenthood, and family related stresses [12].

Culturally speaking, depression among black women can look differently. Shorter-Gooden [3] recommend that even though depression is a biochemical imbalance, we should examine it from a feministic point of view. This will allow us to grasp the impact of the intersectionality of race, gender, and depression. Racial minorities are more likely to suffer from higher levels of poverty which is associated with depression [19].

A list of symptoms for depression:

- Persistent sadness, anxiousness, feeling emptiness, repeated mood swings, and excessive crying.
- Reduction or Increase in appetite.
- Losing or gaining of weight
- Irritability, restlessness
- Hopelessness
- Anxiety to include worrying a lot or difficult relaxing
- Decreased energy, feeling fatigued, or lethargy
- Experiencing feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, pessimism
- Lack of sleep or excessively sleeping
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Inability to concentrate, remember, or make decisions
- Thinking about death or suicide or suicide attempts

It is strongly recommended if anyone is experiencing five or more of the above symptoms, they should seek professional health care immediately [5,6].

There is a common myth that depression is “normal” for older people, teenagers, new mothers, menopausal women, or those with chronic illnesses. As a result, many people go undiagnosed or checked for depression, often at the expense of their own emotional health and those around them [11,20-23].

Depression coping strategies

Depression is a mental illness that can be treated if it is properly diagnosed. It can be treated using psychotherapy, medication or a combination of the two. The choice of treatment depends on the severity of the depressive symptoms. Depressed individuals can participate in support groups, eat properly, and exercise to help with their symptoms.

Even though black women experience the highest rate of depression than their white counter parts, they are often the most under-treated. There are several reasons which might contributed to this:

- Misdiagnosed
- Cultural Biases
- In denial
- Lack of health care insurance
- Stigma toward mental illness
- Strong Black Woman Syndrome
- Strong spiritual and religion belief
- Shame and embarrassed
- Lack of knowledge [24].

Preferred coping strategies:

- Pray it out
- Talk it out with friends
- Ignore it, believing it will get better

Recommended coping strategies:

- Seek mental health treatment
- Exercise
- Eat balanced meals
- Appropriate prescribed anti-depressant medication
- Practice mindfulness
- Journaling
- Biliotherapy
- Depression autobiography
- Listen to your favorite music
- Establish a support team
- Join a counseling support group
- Get a therapist
- Locate a supportive online community
- Rid yourself of shame, blame, and forgiveness
- Learn to love yourself (self-affirmation)
- Celebrate who you are
- Stay connected
- Get adequate sunlight
- Practice relaxation techniques
- Get at least 7 to 8 hours a sleep a night
- Minimize your sweet intake and refine carbs
- Control your negative thought process
- Reduce alcohol and caffeine intake
- Keep a gratitude journal [5,6].

Listed below are a few black women who have courageously openly spoke about their battle with depression. I share this role call so that black women will know they are not alone and that depression has no respect of person. As exploration of their stories takes place, I hope individuals are able to find hope and get a glimpse into the lives of black women who have battled with depression [25-30].

- Professor Monica Coleman
- Terri Williams
- Fantasia Barrino
- Chimamanda Ngozi
- R & B artist, Kechlani Ashley Parrish
- Gospel singer Tasha Cobbs

- Chiara De Blasio
- Andre Lyon
- Karyn Washington creator "For Brown Girls"
- Solange Knowles
- Susan L. Taylor
- Lisa Brown Alexander
- Imade Nibokan founder of "Depression While Black"

Suggested Resources:

- Suicide Hotline
Phone: (800) 273-Talk (8255)
<http://www.suicidepreventiononlifeline.org/>
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DSBA)
Phone: (800)-826-3632
<http://www.dbsalliance.org/>
- American Psychiatry Association
Phone: 703-907-7300
<http://www.psychiatry.org/>
- International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression
<http://www.ifred.org/>
- National Institute of Mental Health
Phone Number: 301-443-4513
Toll Free Number: 1-866-615-6464
Fax number: 301-445-4279
Email Address: nimhinfo@nih.gov
Website: www.nimh.nih.gov
- Depressedwhileblack.com-Imade Nibokan
- Blackgirlsguidetocalm.com-Dr. Shari Dade
- Therapyforblackgirls.com by Dr. Joy Bradford
- On Beyond Blue by Monica Coleman, Ph.D.
- Not Alone: Reflections on Faith and Depression by Monica A. Coleman
- Pain: It Just Look Like We're Not Hurting by Terrie Williams
- Willow Weep For Me: Black Woman's Journey Through Depression by Meri Nan-Ama Danquah
- "Life is Not a fairytale: Black Women and Depression" by Robin Boylorn
- Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength-Chanequa Walker-Barnes
- Strong On The Outside, Dying On the Inside -Lisa Brown Alexander

Conclusion

Depression is nothing to be ashamed of. It can happen to anyone at any time. It is important that black women get comfortable with talking about their emotional health in a positive light, so they can seek the mental health care treatment they need. Depression is a treat-

able disease. However, if it goes undiagnosed it can be debilitating to the person and for those around them. There are many resources available to assist black women who are suffering with depression. It is imperative black women understand they do not have to suffer alone. Additionally, black women do not always have to have their cape. They need to give themselves permission to not be superwoman or a strong black woman. Black women are holding themselves in emotional bondage and unable to take care of themselves. The question then becomes what good is it that you are taking care of everybody else and have left your own health at risk? Therefore, the challenge is to assist black women to start putting their own mental treatment first. This will allow them to live a longer, happier, and healthier life. Yes, black women's health does matter!

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