



Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting

By Terrie M. Williams

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Terrie Williams knows that Black people are hurting. She knows because she's one of them.

Terrie had made it: she had launched her own public relations company with such clients as Eddie Murphy and Johnnie Cochran. Yet she was in constant pain, waking up in terror, overeating in search of relief. For thirty years she kept on her game face of success, exhausting herself daily to satisfy her clients' needs while neglecting her own.

Terrie finally collapsed, staying in bed for days. She had no clue what was wrong or if there was a way out. She had hit rock bottom and she needed and got help.

She learned her problem had a name -- depression -- and that many suffered from it, limping through their days, hiding their hurt. As she healed, her mission became clear: break the silence of this crippling taboo and help those who suffer.

Black Pain identifies emotional pain -- which uniquely and profoundly affects the Black experience -- as the root of lashing out through desperate acts of crime, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, workaholism, and addiction to shopping, gambling, and sex. Few realize these destructive acts are symptoms of our inner sorrow.

Black people are dying. Everywhere we turn, in the faces we see and the headlines we read, we feel in our gut that something is wrong, but we don't know what it is. It's time to recognize it and work through our trauma.

In *Black Pain*, Terrie has inspired the famous and the ordinary to speak out and mental health professionals to offer solutions. The book is a mirror turned on you. Do you see yourself and your loved ones here? Do the descriptions of how the pain looks, feels, and sounds seem far too familiar? Now you can do something about it.

Stop suffering. The help the community needs is here: a clear explanation of our troubles and a guide to finding relief through faith, therapy, diet, and exercise, as

well as through building a supportive network (and eliminating toxic people).

Black Pain encourages us to face the truth about the issue that plunges our spirits into darkness, so that we can step into the healing light.

You are not on the ledge alone.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Black Power masks Black Pain, says Williams, a social worker and founder of a successful public relations firm. Back when black was beautiful, we felt comfortable in our dark skin and 'nappy' hair. Decades later, that sense of pride has morphed into bling that hides the pain of poverty and racism. The result has been depression expressed through violence, addiction, suicide as well as obesity and hypertension. The stoicism blacks are taught in order to not appear weak in the eyes of other black people only leads to denial and isolation. Williams argues persuasively that blacks are not alone. She begins with her own tribulations with depression. From there, she examines how depression is expressed by black men, women and children, and shares the stories of scores of others: rich, poor, successful, incarcerated. This liberal insertion of case reports coupled with a plethora of block quotes can bog down the text. However, Williams is dedicated to convincing her fellow African-Americans that assistance is readily available, whether through counseling, medicine or self-help: [T]here is no need for you to suffer alone or in silence. Help is out there. (*Jan.*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Review

"*Black Pain* is just the conversation starter that we need to begin tackling the taboo topic of depression. Out of the discussion comes the healing." - Tavis Smiley, Author, Television Personality and Radio Host

"*Black Pain* is an immensely readable and down-to-earth book. It will motivate black people who suffer with depression in silence to seek help. This book shines a bright light on the darkness of despair" - Alvin F. Poussaint, MD, Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

"*Black Pain* shines a spotlight on the issue, getting the message out that we must identify, understand, and seek the help we need to heal." - Danny Glover, Actor/Activist

"It boldly confronts the reality of our pain head on, flowing like hot lyrics over the perfect beat." - Sean "Diddy" Combs

"*Black Pain* shows us that it is time that we all talk about our depression and fight with the same vigor that we fight to achieve racial justice." - Charles Ogletree

"*Black Pain* shows us how to recognize that depression that may be hidden away and deal with it. It pushes us to give a voice to the pain without passing it on to others." - Patti LaBelle

"Terrie dares to bring out what so many have not had the courage to confront, having learned that you can never heal until you expose what hurts you. *Black Pain* is an opportunity to reach your breakthrough moment." - Rev. Al Sharpton

"The racism, the struggle, the feelings of hopelessness-it hurts like hell. *Black Pain* shows us why we are dying in the streets." - Jamie Hector, actor, *The Wire*

"*Black Pain* takes a candid and in-depth look at depression in black America. The book provides hope to those who battle with the disease and offers an understanding for the friends and loved ones who care for them. I highly recommend this book." - Bishop T.D. Jakes, Senior Pastor, *The Potter's House*

"The world is full of damaged people inflicting pain upon other damaged people. The time for sweeping issues such as depression under the rug in the African-American community has long since passed. We need to face our demons head on and defeat them so that we can truly appreciate all that life has to offer...This book will serve as an eye-opener to many and an inspiration to all." - Zane, *NY Times* Bestselling Author of *Addicted* and NAACP Image Award Winner for *Breaking the Cycle*

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Chapter One

Depression

Not Killing Us Softly

I'm Coming Out, I Want the World to Know It's not just what we say, but what we don't say...

In June 2005 I wrote an article about my depression for *Essence* magazine. I was not prepared for the reaction it generated. I received over 10,000 letters, over half of them from people "coming out" for the first time about their pain and depression. Complete strangers wrote to me because I was the safest person they could share with. Not friends, not family members, but me -- someone they didn't know! I also wasn't prepared for the intensity of my frustration as I came to understand how many Black women and men are suffering silently.

The folks who wrote to me were scared -- some of them terrified -- to breathe a word to anyone; they were paralyzed by the fear that no one would understand or accept them. Their fear was echoed in conversation upon conversation I had while traveling across the country giving talks about how we are doing -- about waking up in pain each day -- to audiences that ranged from CEOs to regular churchgoers. After my talks, person after person would come to me to confide that they, too, were "going through it."

Sometimes I would come home from these trips totally drained in my heart and soul, having heard stories like the one I heard from a man whose two sisters are home suffering from major depression. He can't talk about it, nor can his family, even though he's a respected physician and his brother is a well-regarded man of the cloth!

If I'm honest with myself, and with you, the fact is that I'm more like these folks than I care to admit. If then *Essence* editor in chief Diane Weathers hadn't sensed what I was going through and asked me to write the piece, I don't know how much longer it would have taken before I really told someone I was depressed -- or if I would ever have told anyone before the point where there was no hiding it anymore.

In fact, my mom, dad, and sister didn't know what I was going through until I mailed them a draft of the article and wrote a kind of offhand note saying, "I wanted you to see this before it came out." I didn't even ask for their responses!

My mom called immediately. "I'm so sad you didn't feel like you could come to me. Maybe there was something I could have done!" And my sister told me that she, too, had been through the fire. But I was so used to handling things on my own that I believed telling them would only make them worry. I knew I wasn't suicidal, even though I *was* dying on the inside. The pain I feel is so hard to talk about that my closest family still hears more about it when I'm in front of large groups than one-on-one.

These days I use my visibility to talk about pain and how we mask it. Every time I step up to the microphone I "out" myself as someone in pain. I do it because I know that by sharing my story, my fragility, insecurity, frailty, and woundedness, I liberate someone else to do the same.

Sometimes the liberation comes through humor. In the months after the *Essence* piece came out, people would see me at events and shyly come over to me. I knew they wanted to mention the article and talk about depression, but didn't know how, so I would break the ice. "I can tell you read the *Essence* article," I would say. "Don't worry. I took my medication today. Everything's okay -- and you don't have to whisper the word 'depression'!" That little bit of humor, that easy laugh, was usually all it took to open the gates to honest talk about something we think is shameful. And I'm telling you, there is not one among us who has not been touched by this!

This book is as much about identifying depression as it is about the power of testimony. Some of the people whose stories are in this book were willing to bare their souls for the record, in the name of a cause bigger than themselves -- and that includes some of the most well-known names here. Others were willing and even eager to share their stories, but feared that giving their names could jeopardize their livelihoods or hurt their families, especially their young children; these are not famous people and I have respected their requests for anonymity because I believe their stories are the most valuable thing they have to offer. Finally, I have drawn on magazine and television interviews from a handful of famous people who have spoken publicly about their struggles with depression.

More important than anything else is that the thousands of people who have communicated with me about this in person, in writing, or on the phone have broken the silence that makes depression so lethal. In the passages below Set Shakur, Mama DeBarge, Joyce Walker Joseph, and Diane Weathers come out to me about their depression.

Testimony

If you ever danced or sang along to the infectious music of the DeBarge family, you can thank Etterlene "Mama" DeBarge for bringing all those gifted artists into our world. Sadly, her marriage to their father was nothing like the sweet music her children made. A jealous, controlling man, he kept "Mama" pregnant for most of fifteen years -- pregnant, lonely, and depressed. She shared with me a chilling excerpt from her forthcoming memoir:

I lived every day in my own personal hell. I had noticed myself becoming more reclusive and despondent, and I spent every waking moment paranoid and afraid. I very rarely had visitors, and at one point I had even stopped answering the phone. The telephone was a luxury that I had learned to do without after my husband accused me of "talking to another man on the phone." It was actually a wrong number, and I had made the mistake of answering. It's a funny thing, depression; it's the only intangible thing I know of that can actually cause very real, very tangible changes in a person. The burden and the pain of my life weighed me down like a wet woolen blanket. I willed myself through every day by repeating to myself over and over again, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*, and I would make it at least one more day.

"Mama" made it through many days, and helped bring her children to realize their gifts and share them, but how much richer would all their lives have been if only she had been able to get the help she needed when she needed it most?

Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., is the Jesse Climenko Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, as well as the founder and executive director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice. This is what

he told me about powerful Black men and depression:

African-American leaders in particular face tremendous obstacles rising to the top, and even greater challenges staying there. We are the face of the struggle and are expected to always show strength, grit, determination, and confidence, when the burden of depression is doing everything it can to pull us back down. It is time that we all talk about our depression, and fight with the same vigor we bring to the fight for racial justice. We must reveal the darker moments and show, despite the pain that tries to bring us down, we realize that seeking treatment, talking through our pain, and taking the mask off our helplessness will not only make us stronger, but will allow others to appreciate the fact that depression touches us all. But we can fight back, and we can win.

His words were much on my mind as I talked with two other powerful Black men, Carl Anthony Foreman and Bill Lynch, about their own pain.

Carl Anthony Foreman, the sixty-two-year-old powerhouse real estate mogul and owner of radio properties, was diagnosed only four years ago as suffering from bipolar disorder. For most of his life he experienced mood swings, at times feeling like he could conquer the world and buying up tons of property. At other times he felt bone weary, unable to talk, staying in bed in a darkened room for two to three days at a time.

Despite the range of his achievements his depression led him to move away from his wife and three sons when his youngest was fifteen years old. Although he supported them and lived nearby, when he sent the family on vacation, he couldn't go with them.

In some ways Carl's resources buffered him because he didn't have to go to a regular "job" every day. He would call his office at 3:00 a.m. "so I wouldn't have to talk to anyone." Then he'd leave a message that he wouldn't be in the office for a day or two so nobody would call and he could stay home alone, in silence. He wouldn't answer his phone. He would respond to voice mails in the middle of the night so he didn't have to talk to people. This strategy also gave him the advantages of surprise and respect, since people assumed he was working 24/7.

For a while he tried Zoloft and Lexapro, but they had side effects that, for him, were worse than the symptoms. "Chemical imbalance in our brains is no different than any other affliction we might have in our bodies. It's just that when it happens to the brain, it affects how you act and how you communicate."

Diagnosis late in life was a blessing and now Carl manages his depression by putting less stress on himself and not overworking. He attends fewer events, not stretching himself so thin, and does much of his business by phone. He also calls his therapist when he starts to feel overwhelmed. He's been coming out about his depression person by person, and each time he does, it's a little more liberating.

Sekyiwa (Set) Shakur is a thirty-one-year-old high-powered fashion designer and sister of the late Tupac Shakur. She's a warm and open spirit, someone who is clear about who she is and who she's becoming. She's also a woman who uses her own pain and challenges to help others. At twenty-three she began mentoring girls at the YWCA, because she feels it's important for young people to "hear us speak our truth, so that they know healing is possible."

She remembers always being uncomfortable in her own skin. Often she felt angry and would argue endlessly

with a...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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