

# Mental Health Remains Stigmatized in the Black Community While Black Youth Continue to Die from Suicide

By Shawnta S. Barnes - June 11, 2018



With the recent premiere of season two of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a series based on a novel of the same name about a girl who died by suicide, and because Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain died by suicide last week, many discussions have taken place about how people who are struggling with the will to live can seek help and how others can support them. These conversations reminded me once again the importance of mental health and the stigma around seeking help or being open about struggling with mental health in the black community. Last October, in my article, "Mental Health

Matters Not Just for Students, but for Their Teachers Too,” I talked about my mental health struggles while dealing with an infertility diagnosis and living with chronic pain from endometriosis, a contributing factor to my infertility. It was hard to cope when people from the black community and the black church were suggesting I wasn’t strong enough or I wasn’t praying hard enough essentially dismissing mental health services as a viable option. I’m glad I sought out therapy and it did make a difference.

I was lucky enough to find a therapist who specializes in counseling couples dealing with infertility who also happened to be a black woman. Even if a black person is bold enough to ignore the voices in the black community telling him or her to be stronger and pray more, that person may not be able to find a therapist that can relate to him or her who also understands the nuances the person has to overcome just to seek treatment as a black person. I recently read *The Mighty* article, “Black Children Are at a Higher Risk for Suicide Between the Ages of 5 and 12.” In the article, Quinn Gee, a licensed psychotherapist in Washington D.C., highlights why representation matters in the mental health profession.

*This isn’t to say white therapists can’t be helpful. They just can’t relate to some of the cultural characteristics and experiences of a black client. It’s important to have “culturally-competent” therapists, Gee said.*

*“It’s hard for little black kids to relate to an older white man or white woman therapist,” Gee said. “It comes from just ‘you don’t look like me.’”...It’s hard to open up to someone you’ve never had a conversation with and can’t relate to.*

This article confirmed what my husband and I have personally experienced during our search to find a therapist for one of our twin sons. When our sons were four, one struggled in preschool not with academics, but with his behavior. Then, our search for a therapist began. The first therapist was a young white woman and my son connected to her, but our insurance would not pay any portion of the services. The sessions were expensive, so we decided to find a therapist our insurance would cover fully or partially.

The second therapist was a middle-aged white woman. My son didn't warm up to her right away like the previous therapist, but we just thought he needed more time. When I called to make the third appointment, the therapist said she didn't think it would work out and even after I asked follow up questions, she wouldn't elaborate on why. At the end of the day, if someone tells you he or she doesn't want to work with your child, you better move on.

The third therapist was a young white woman and new to the profession. My son warmed up to her more than therapist number two, but she just seemed to not know what to do. My husband and I weren't about to let our child be a guinea pig while she figured it out.

My son's current therapist has been his therapist for most of the past school year and she is great. She is Asian and my son loves her. She has a comprehensive plan that involves all of us. At times he attends sessions alone. Other times, he attends sessions with his twin brother (if only she could follow us home and help with their sibling rivalry). We also have family sessions with all four of us.

When I recently reflected on my son's first-grade year in comparison to his kindergarten year with his principal, she shared how different he was this year. He's not perfect, but he's not making comments anymore like, "Nobody likes me" and he's less worried about being perfect. My twins boys are on track to potentially be in high ability programming later in elementary school and he struggles with not being able to know everything and not getting everything right even though he is almost a grade level ahead in every subject. Therapy has helped him find balance and help us support him in maintaining that balance.

He's seven now, so he has had four therapists in three years. That was a lot of effort on us as parents. *The Mighty* article also states, "Suicide among black children ages 5 to 12 is almost two times higher than the rate among white kids of the same age range," and knowing this, I get extremely concerned. There are too many barriers for black families to find a therapist. You have cost, availability, lack of representation, and negativity and lack of support from the black community.

We need to encourage more black young people in high school to go into the mental health profession and black people need to respect and not tear down other black people who choose to pursue mental health services as an option. We have fragile people in the black community and our most vulnerable are our black children. Until we destigmatize mental health, more black children will be lost to suicide.

If you need support, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text the word "HOME" to 741741 to receive services 24 hours a day from the Crisis Text Line.