The Stigma of Mental Health in the Black Community & the Increase in Black Children Suicide

By Educator Barnes – October 10, 2019

When I was a child, I did not know of anyone in school, K-12, who had died by suicide. If I ever heard about it, it was on the news and the person was an adult. Today, suicide is more prevalent

in the media. It seems that no one is immune, from well-known celebrities to successful adults. What breaks my heart the most is when the person is a child.

In the black community, I have heard elders say, "Suicide is what white people do." This myth harms the black community. Not only is there an increase in children dying by suicide, but there is also an increase of black children dying by suicide. A study published in 2018 in *JAMA Pediatrics* shows, "racial disparities in suicide rates are age-related. Specifically, suicide rates for black children aged 5-12 were roughly two times higher than those of similarly aged white children." The age range started at five years old. That weighed heavy on me. That's such a short time to be on the earth to lose all hope.

Therefore, I am glad the focus for the 2019 World Mental Health Day is suicide prevention. Suicide prevention must be taken seriously in the black community and not be seen as something white people do. In the black community, we are good at labeling an action or activity as white and then shaming black people who do that action or participate in certain activities. This undercuts who that black person is because a core piece of that person has been attacked. What if that person is a black child? If a black child is having thoughts about not wanting to live but feels as if he or she cannot even vocalize those opinions, that child's life is in danger.

The stigma of mental health in the black community is putting our children in danger. I have spoken publicly about being in therapy. One of the places where I have spoken publicly about this is within the walls of the church. The black church is one of the places where you can get shamed for even expressing you are feeling depressed or anxious or suicidal. It is the place where I have had people stop me after I had spoken to remind me that I should not share so much or that now that I'm in a good place, there is no need to dwell on the past. I also can't forget the church folks that remind me of one of these church phrases such as, "There's nothing too hard for God" or "The Lord won't give you more than you can bear."

When our black children's pain feels unbearable, and they believe they can't even speak about it because they will get shamed or ostracized by the black community or told they will go to hell, the black community is backing our children into a dark corner. We need more black adults to be transparent about their mental health so our children will know they are not damaged because they are having certain thoughts. We need the black church to stop telling black people that prayer is the only option. I'm not against prayer. Prayer and meditation with mental health services is a viable option for black children. How many more black children need to die by

suicide before more black people stop perpetuating stereotypes and start promoting mental health services?

I don't want any more children to feel so hopeless that they don't wish to live anymore. Our children are the future, and we need to do all we can to ensure they live to enjoy that future.

Click here for suicide prevention resources.