

# Mental Health Affects Black People, Too

**WATERLOO, IA** - How does one celebrate National Women's month? You start by celebrating those that give life, women! March is the designated month in America where we celebrate and honor the lives of special women. Women who have made a positive contribution to the development of this country. In the month of March, we teach our kids the importance of remembering great individuals like Maya Angelou or Harriet Tubman. We remind them of how great these people were and how important it is for them to live up to the standards set before them. Although those women were great, sometimes we forget to honor the great women we see every single day.

A couple of years ago a co-worker of mine asked me a question. Is mental health talked about in the black community? Not a strange question at that

moment. My co-worker Karen Schatz, had just lost her son Tyler Swyter to suicide. Her question was sincere and honest, and one I could not answer at the time. I shared, "We don't talk too much about mental health issues in our community". She suggested running a PSA (public service announcement) at one of the local radio stations, whose audience is predominantly African American.



Since Tyler's death, Karen has been outspoken and an advocate of bringing awareness to mental health issues. She has created a non-profit organization called "Make life Swyter" (pronounced sweeter) in hopes to bring awareness to issues like mental health. One of the things Karen expressed, when dealing with mental health issues, is noticing signs of depression. When Tyler took his life, Karen stated the signs were there, withdrawal from family, sleeping more and lack of energy. Karen has made it her lifelong mission of informing the public about depression, mental health, and suicide prevention. Not only does her nonprofit organization provide information and resources on mental health awareness, Karen also does speaking engagements to inform the public of this rarely discussed topic.

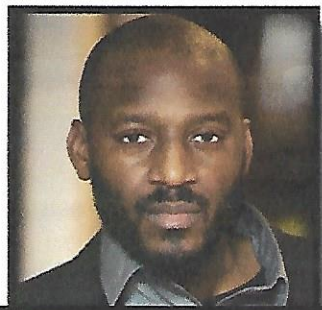
We don't talk about mental health issues in the African American community. Depending on a young man's age, crying can be viewed as weakness or soft. To be totally honest, mental health issues were always seen as a "white" issue in the black community. The psychiatrist in our community was always a close friend or worse, alcohol or marijuana. For too long, we have ignored the mental health issues that have plagued our communities for centuries, and now it's affecting our kids. JAMA Pediatrics published data compiled from a study done by Nationwide Children's Hospital in Ohio. The study found the rate of suicides for black children ages 5 to 12 exceeded that of young whites. Although suicide rates among these age groups are rare, CDC statistics state

the number is accelerating. Psychiatrist Samoon Ahmad attributed these high numbers to several things, one being social media. Because of social media platforms, kids are less likely to engage with other children. According to the Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research, social media sites are making people more depressed. One reason for social media depression, people see a Facebook post of other people lives and become depressed when they think about their lives. Now add poverty, low self-esteem and a lack of positive role models for children, and you have a recipe for disaster. Would you be able to spot the signs of depression? If your child was crying out for help, would you be able to recognize their cry for help? It's time to start discussing and recognizing mental health issues in our community.

One of the things Karen stressed, there is no shame in talking about mental health issues. There is no shame in asking for help. Sometimes individuals in our community will not ask for help due to the stigma associated with mental health issues. Times have changed and we must have the conversation. We cannot afford to lose another life due to society's ignorance when it comes to this topic. Never forget the mental pain and depression our forefathers went thru in their sojourn here in America. Never forget the pain and tribulations our parents may have gone thru during the Jim Crow era. Anytime we hear an African American call another African American the N-word, we must recognize how deep the mental illness and self-hate we have in our community. We can no longer afford to pass down our pain and sorrow to our kids. We must recognize mental illness for what it is, a disease that can take the life of our future.

I thank Karen during National Women's month, a woman who is fighting the stigma of mental health. A woman who inspired me to address a topic that is rarely discussed in our community. If you or a loved one is dealing with mental health issues, or you would like more information on this topic, please visit Karen's website makelifeswyter.com. You will find a bevy of information and resources when it comes to mental health.

*I am SauyaJ, Healthy Heart Expert and on behalf of The Soultown, we thank Karen and the Make life Swyter Organization for having SOUL! 🙏*



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