

Chad Francour
Addressing the Unspeakable

Addressing the Unspeakable- Depression

In your home was depression and anxiety along with mental illness ever talked about in a constructive way? It feels like these issues are becoming more common. Why? Is it because parents or caregivers are just willing to accept the responsibility or is it because they are too unaware that there is life going on outside a? This paper will help illustrate the importance of addressing these issues.

Nikki Webber Allen, who is a filmmaker and runs a nonprofit that works to end the stigma around mental illness, in particular, individuals of color. Nikki who is black thought when she was first diagnosed with generalized anxiety and depression that it was unique to her and was seen as a weakness. Most individuals in the black community believe that depression is just another label. So much of it, particularly if you come from a more disadvantaged background when you are worried about how to pay the bills, how to put food on the table, and the last thing on your mind is self-care. If it is absolutely seen as a luxury but another part of it was the complex history in the United States from slavery and Jim Crow laws to institutional racism to black pride. Black Americans are proud of on their mental strength, toughness, and resilience.

Those attributes meant so many things over the last 200 years to what is considered black pride. She earned a Master's degree in media studies and was the successful television producer and even won two Emmys for her work. She felt on the inside, however, distressed and a failure to her family. She showed signs like a lack of interest in things she usually enjoyed and barely ate, struggled with insomnia, and felt isolated and depleted but depressed not her. Nikki thought she would have to tough it out on her own but sadly it was not getting better.

Everything, on the outside, seemed to be fine but on the inside it felt anything but kosher. She remembers in her life what it felt like to be happy when she was younger but now at 30 years old that kind of feeling one gets as children never returns. She still did not realize that was the depression talking. It was not until her doctor suggested to her a lot of the symptoms she described were related towards anxiety and depression. She would push back against her doctor's suggestions and said, "That is not me; that happens to other people."

Do you have this narrative in your head that says, "I am not depressed, that is a mental illness and those are the people we see on the street corners talking to themselves." Nikki was holding down a well-paying job and it did not jive with what she viewed as mental illness.

On July 4, 2013, Nikki's world came crashing down on her. She received a phone call from her mother saying her 22-year-old nephew, Paul, has ended his life after years of battling depression and anxiety. There are no words to describe the devastation. Paul and Nikki were close but she never knew he was in so much pain. Neither had ever shared the struggles, shame, and stigma that kept both silent. Paul had been struggling for a few years with depression and anxiety and neither one ever talked about those symptoms. The shame and stigma Nikki was afraid to talk with him. She wanted to be seen as the cool aunt and did not want Paul to think something was wrong with her so she never communicated with him about her own depression. He did tell his parents about his symptoms but asked to keep the news to themselves. He did not want others to view him as a weak. In other words, he was ashamed that he was depressed. The news broke Nikki's heart.

Nikki thought there must be some way to bring these issues (e.g., mental disorders) into conversation. From the Ted stage, Nikki said,

For black American stressors like racism and socioeconomic status disparities put a 20% greater risk to develop a mental disorder than other white Americans but yet they seek mental health services at about half the white Americans for one reason is the only, stigma. On average 63% of black Americans mistake depression as a weakness. The suicide rate, sadly, has doubled among black children in the last 20 years.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/nikki_webber_allen_don_t_suffer_from_your_depression_in_silence/transcript#t-87756-](https://www.ted.com/talks/nikki_webber_allen_don_t_suffer_from_your_depression_in_silence/transcript#t-87756)

Armed with this information, Nikki refused to be silent anymore. With her family's blessing, she would share their story and hopes to start a national conversation about depression.

"Being strong is killing us," said Kelly Pierre-Louis and she is right. We have narratives that need to be retired of a strong black independent man or woman who no matter how many times the person has been knocked down here she just needs to shake it off and whether through the storm. Having feelings is not a sign of weakness, having feelings shows that we are human. When we deny our humanity it makes us feel empty inside allowing ourselves to self-medicate in order to fulfill the void. These days she shares her story openly and asks others to share their story. She believes that is what it may take to help others suffering in silence to know; he or she is not alone.

If you are depressed and keep it inside it would make total sense that the symptoms get worse but if we talk openly about our depression it is a pathway to healing. Nikki was amazed at the feedback she received from so many friends and family when she spoke of her depression. She says there is not a week that goes by where someone has seen her Ted talk to say it has helped. She has said one of her sincerest regrets was that she was not there for her nephew but her hope is that she will inspire others with the lesson that she has learned. Life is beautiful, sometimes it is messy and always unpredictable but it will all be okay when you have a support system to help you through it. I hope that if your burden gets too heavy you will ask for help.