

A Hope that Don Cornelius' Apparent Suicide Opens Door on Taboo Topic



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When the news broke of the death of cultural icon Don Cornelius, shock and condolences permeated the Twittersphere and beyond.

Alongside all the praise and accolades of the history maker, many suicide prevention advocates were hoping that his apparent suicide would give people an avenue for talking about something we don't like to discuss.

"This may be an opportunity, since he was so very well-known and such a cultural icon in the black community, to stir up some discussion about suicide among black people and ways to head it off or prevent it to begin to bring the figures down," said Dr. Alvin Poussaint, author and a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School.

For generations, much of our community has thought of suicide as something that black folks just don't do. And that's ridiculous.

For too long we have closed our eyes and sealed our lips when it comes to mental health issues in our community. Are you depressed? *Get over it.* Was the neighbor taken to the hospital for taking too many pills again? *Yeah, but she was just trying to get attention.* Why'd Darnell jump off the pier, especially since he couldn't swim? *You know how crazy that fool was.*

"Suicide knows no color, it can happen in any population, at any age," said Donna Barnes, co-founder of the National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide. "It can happen to anyone."

She knows that all too well: Her son killed himself at the age of 20.

The latest numbers from the CDC show that in 2009, there were 1,649 black men who committed suicide. That's a rate of 9.3 per 100,000 people, a small decrease from the rate in 2008. For black women, 385 committed suicide in 2009, at a rate of 1.9, which was a slight increase from the previous year.

The CDC says suicide is the third-leading cause of death among black males between ages 15 and 24, following homicide and accidents.

"You can't prevent what you don't know and you don't talk about," Barnes said. "We don't talk about it so how do we know who is suffering and who is not?"

According to Poussaint, blacks consider suicide as a sign of weakness.

"Black people like to be proud of themselves that they survived slavery, Jim Crow, poverty and that they don't cave in to despair," he said.

Also, Poussaint said blacks tend to deny they're depressed and often don't see it as a medical or mental condition.

"It's interesting that we as a people will deny suicide and depression at the same time blacks are the people who culturally created the blues," he said. "They sung about the misery. They put it in spirituals: 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen...' 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child' all of those songs are about depression and feeling isolated and alone as slaves and thereafter."

Poussaint said there are plenty of efforts to educate black people about diabetes and high blood pressure, but we need more support for mental health services.

We're also nowhere near as open as we should be about the issue.

"If there's a suicide, how are you going to find out? The families are going to cover it up. The church will cover it up," Poussaint said. "Ministers don't talk about dying of suicide, but they might talk about someone dying of cancer... So there's a wall of silence up around suicide that people aren't even supposed to discuss it."

Suicide is considered taboo among all races, but Barnes said some groups, such as whites, are better at talking about it. According to the CDC, in 2009 the rate of suicide among American Indians was 15.03, followed by 14.31 for whites, 6.24 for Asians, 5.94 for Hispanics and 5.3 for blacks.

Even though the rate for blacks is comparatively lower, blacks have higher rates of suicidal behavior, such as drug-induced deaths and homicides, Barnes said.

"If you want to kill yourself all you have to do is get in harm's way," she said.

When Barnes began her organization in 1998, she would go into the community to talk about suicide and people would often tell her to leave because all she was doing was stirring up trouble, putting ideas into folks' heads. She said now it's getting better and people are starting to listen.

That's partly because for many young people, the notion of the stigma is fading.

"The idea of suicide is more acceptable among younger generations than older generations," said Dr. Sean Joe, a professor at the University of Michigan's School of Medicine. "Older people tend to stigmatize it more because of religious reasons and the thought that black people don't really engage in that kind of behavior."

In fact, Joe said in younger generations, there's no significant difference between blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics when it comes to suicidal behaviors. And since it's considered less of a stigma, younger people are more likely to talk about it.

Experts say opening up about suicide is crucial and people need to know how to seek help as well as identify the warning signs: Talking about wanting to die or feeling hopeless; increasing use of alcohol or drugs; withdrawing or feeling isolated.

So let's talk to each other. If someone tells you that they're having trouble, don't dismiss them. And older people, share your emotional struggles so we know others have gone through this. An open dialog could easily save lives.