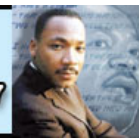




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African American males and suicide: Changing attitudes require a new look

Oct 13, 2010



Mary Hill-Wagner

Young Blacks more likely to 'end it all'

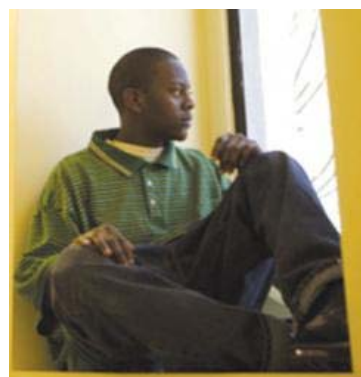
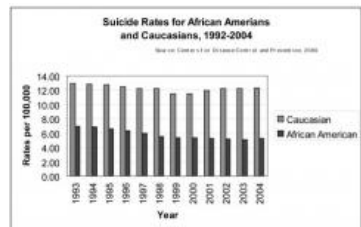
When Donna Barnes sought help to deal with her son's death two decades ago, there were no services in the African American community for families coping with the suicide of a loved one, she said.

The stigma was too great, Barnes said. Also, it has been a popular notion that African Americans do not take their own lives, she added.

It was believed that after dealing with slavery and the attendant legacy of institutionalized racism as well, Black communities blighted by gangs and drugs, there was nothing that African Americans could not handle emotionally, Barnes said.

But the recent death of Broncos wide receiver Kenny McKinley by an apparent self-inflicted gun shot wound has brought the issue of suicide to the forefront. Indeed, untreated emotional problems can lead to the intentional taking of one's life, regardless of ethnicity.

According to media reports, the 23-year old McKinley was a second-year professional football player, who had been on the team's injured reserve list since early August with a knee injury. Perhaps McKinley became despondent over not being able to get enough playing time, Barnes said. "We all get depressed. Maybe with (McKinley) he saw his life pulled out from under him because of his knee injury. He got hit real hard,



when he couldn't play ball anymore."

To help families cope with such matters, Barnes co-founded the National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS). She now serves as the organization's executive director.

NOPCAS was formed to stop the tragic epidemic of suicide in minority communities.

But it's hard to know exactly why someone would take his own life, Barnes said. "Many times people take

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their lives, and it's not due to (clinical) depression. He might have felt hopelessness. He put his whole future into playing ball. He put all his eggs in one basket."

"We do have some of the lowest suicide (rates among the races)," Barnes said. "But suicide of African Americans increased substantially by about 200 percent in some age groups in the 1980's and 1990s."

Black males are at particular risk. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third cause of death among African American males between ages 15 and 24, behind homicide and accidents.

Perhaps Black males are in jeopardy because they bear the brunt of crime and drugs in the African-American community, according to some researchers. African-American males have a higher rate of joblessness, criminal victimization and incarceration than other segments of society.

Sean Joe, an associate professor in the School of Social Work and the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan's School of Medicine, has studied the trend of suicide among African American males for the past decade.

And although there is a stigma against suicide in the African-American community as a whole, suicide carries less of a stigma with young adults than with older Blacks, Joe said.

"Younger Blacks are similar to younger Whites now in their attitudes. Those are things worth considering. Any stress might cause one to reevaluate life," Joe said. "When life is difficult (young Blacks) have a similar outlook (to young Whites). There has been an integration of American norms. If you go to any high school and ask (Blacks) if they know someone who has at least attempted suicide, hands will go up."

"How many young men who put themselves in situations where it's very likely that they're going to get shot to death are actually committing suicide? There is such a thing as what we call victim-precipitated homicide, which is a suicide," said Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a noted professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. The doctor made his comments in a March 2008 interview with National Public Radio.

"The most classic example would be suicide by cop, which you read about in the newspaper from time to time, where people wanted to be shot; to be killed because they were suicidal, but they didn't want to do it themselves. And sometimes they don't want to do it themselves, because there's still a stigma attached to committing suicide, so they'd rather have someone else kill them or have it seem like an accident, that they really didn't want to do it, but yet they were suicidal," Poussaint said in the radio interview.

However, Joe said information is difficult to access on suicide by cop or victim-precipitated homicide—where someone may have wanted to be killed because they were suicidal and didn't want to do it themselves.


Future study should focus on getting mental help resources to Blacks and studying the nature of masculinity among Blacks in order to make the seeking out of such services less stigmatized, he said.

"We need to look at why Black youth do not go to services, and why they drop out when they do," Joe said. "With males in general, you have to deal with this masculinity issue. If you express emotion, this is considered weakness. The idea of masculinity and not emoting has put these young boys in emotional straight jackets. They can't turn to their families because they believe 'our boys should be strong enough,'" Joe said. "You have to allow them a space to emote. You must continue to do health education with families; not just medication, and you have to encourage families to keep them coming (to psychiatric sessions)."

Barnes agrees. "There's a stigma of having a mental illness and a stigma about being treated for it. (African Americans) believe it's a character flaw (to have a mental illness)," she said. Or they may even go as far to say, it's a weakness, Barnes said.

"I asked, 'why aren't we discussing this?'" Barnes remembers. "I started talking about (suicide). Then, people would talk to me privately. And my position was, why are we whispering?"

Today, the organization reaches many people of color and encourages them to find out information about suicide, so that loved ones can pick up on the signs that someone may be contemplating taking his life.





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






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According to the American Association of Suicidology, warning signs of suicide include a person who may be idealizing suicide; demonstrating feelings of hopelessness; abusing substances; demonstrating feelings of purposelessness; demonstrating feelings of being trapped; isolating oneself from others; and demonstrating recklessness, anger and mood changes.

“We’re reaching people now, and we’re putting it on the minds of families, so they can look out for family members. The people around them need to be able to pick up the signs, like talking negatively about everything; thinking no one cares or isolating themselves,” Barnes said.

Some 1,958 African Americans completed suicide in the U.S. in 2007, according to the American Association of Suicidology. Of these 1,606 or 82 percent were males.

The group noted that as with all racial groups, African-American females were more likely than males to attempt suicide and African American males were more likely to successfully commit suicide.

It’s possible that males “complete” suicide because they are more likely to use a fire arm in the attempt, according to Barnes.

There are various theories about why suicide has increased among African Americans, Barnes said.

“Kids from baby boomer parents didn’t practice their religious beliefs,” she said. So, these children of boomers were more likely to commit suicide. “Also, we moved our kids out of traditional Black neighborhoods to White neighborhoods, where they were the only Black kids in their classes, and they were often isolated. They didn’t have (cultural) references to help them. That’s another theory. And guns became readily available (in many communities). It’s about 60 percent of completed suicides that happen through gunfire. There are guns everywhere.”

Suicidal behavior may also present itself in drug use and homicide, Barnes said.

“We’re a community that doesn’t talk about it. That’s the problem. When you do have someone who takes their own life, the family feels they have nowhere to go for the healing process. And it’s hard to deal with it, if you won’t talk about it. Families should seek out support groups.”

In 1999 then-Surgeon General David Satcher began talking about firearm-related suicide among young African-American males and other nonwhites as a public health problem.

“Reports show that the historical gap in suicide rates between African-American males and White males of similar age has been narrowing,” according to Joe, who in a published report which analyzed the data, showed that the rate of firearm-related suicides among African-American males age 15 to 19 increased by 133 percent between 1979 and 1997.

“The 1999 Surgeon General’s report on suicide highlights the importance of restricting access to firearms in preventing suicide,” Joe said in one report. “Our findings underscore the need for all health care professionals to regularly ask whether depressed or suicidal African-American youth have access to firearms. Although this recommendation may seem obvious, several studies of medical practitioners have found that such patients are not asked this question with any kind of regularity.”

Those seeking help with the issue of suicide can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK (8255), a free, 24-hour hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Your call will be routed to the nearest crisis center to you.

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Hot styles that will keep you warm this winter.

The steamy summer days which, seemed to only visit Southern California for a week or so at a time, are coming to an end and the chill of the winter is being felt in every breeze that blows by. As we pack away our shorts, tanks and sandals and pull out the chunky sweaters, scarves and coats for the fall, below find the top three trends that will make sure you’re, hot all winter long.

- [Sharpton meets with FCC to temper Limbaugh comments](#) -

The Rev. Al Sharpton is currently conducting a series of meetings with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in an effort to put an end to what he says are Rush Limbaugh's racist rants that have become routine on his radio show.

Sharpton recently appeared on MSNBC, where he and host Ed Schultz discussed their disapproval of Limbaugh, as well as Sharpton's efforts with the FCC.

"We have a series of meetings going on, and we're going to see the FCC next week," Sharpton said.

- ["Left of Black" tackles cultural issues](#) -

Duke University's African and African American Studies professor Mark Anthony Neal recently launched a new weekly program, "Left of Black," which conducts interviews with academics, authors, and artists discussing important cultural issues affecting the Black community.

"I definitely see this program as an extension of my desire to make the knowledge produced in and by the university available to a wider public," Neal said. "It is also a chance to highlight the ideas of folk who aren't the standard talking heads."

- [An African civilization in the Americas](#) -

Black history does not start with slavery, but it begins with the conception of mankind and transcends all of the world's history. Although popular teachings reject the great accomplishments of African and African American people, researchers and historians have confirmed Black people are the foundation of civilizations throughout the world, including the Americas.

- [Prostate cancer screening and Black men](#) -

If you're an African-American male age of 45 and over, and you haven't had a serious conversation with your doctor about prostate cancer, shame on you. Why? Because getting serious about prostate cancer is really not about you; really, it's not.

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