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**Black Girls, Anxiety
& Depression**
When It's More Than
Just A Little Stress



Suffering in Plain Sight: Black Girls, Anxiety, and Depression

Sweaty palms. Hard night sleeps. Heart pumps so heavy it feels like your chest is about to burst. Temperamental mood swings. Dark clouds looming over you when the sun is shining bright. The need to alienate yourself when laughter surrounds you. These are signs of anxiety and depression: two topics rarely discussed in the Black community. So, let's talk

By LaToya Cross





On one hundred, we all share the experience of occasional stress and overwhelm. Maybe your teacher is doin' the most assigning a gang of reading in a short amount of time, maybe you're dealing with a recent breakup, or you've just got too much on your plate between schoolwork and extracurriculars. But when it comes to understanding things like generalized anxiety and clinical depression, the lines between what's normal and what's severe can get a bit blurry.

All of a sudden, the comedian of your group no longer desires to tell that gut-punching joke, or the girl with the flowy bi-weekly blowout starts showing up to school with a multicolored chop she tries hiding under hats and hoodies, or you, yourself, abruptly start ghosting your squad's Friday night outings.

When worry and fear reach the point of being excessive, cause you to retreat from your

social life, and make it hard to do everyday tasks, it could be a sign that you're dealing with anxiety that's leveled up and needs to be addressed. "Generally, when people have severe anxiety and have a true diagnosis of anxiety, sometimes [it] makes them think less of what they have to get done, and they enter this avoidance behavior," says Marline Francois, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), teen therapist, and CEO of Heart Empowerment Counseling Center in New Jersey. "Avoidance is something that happens when people are extremely anxious. [They feel like] 'I'm losing control. I can't do this.' So, they tend to just back away from whatever they're supposed to do. They neglect what needs to get done, which ends up adding more anxiety. It minimizes [it] for the moment, but the long-term anxiety is still there."

As for depression? Let's say you notice your interest level (or that of a friend's) involving everything that has to do with l - i - f - e has

taken a deep dive to low. Depression might be the reason. "Irritability is one of the most common signs for depression. It can turn into anxiety because now you have to go out in public," explains Francois. "Maybe there's a family function and you have to go. You have to put on this front. You can't show them that you're depressed ... Deep down inside, you know that you're feeling lonely, sad, and just don't feel like you have anyone to talk to."

Stigma & Silence

Why do people struggling with anxiety and depression often keep things on the hush? For one thing, there's the fear of being labeled.

"There's a lot of stigma around the labeling because once you're labeled, then what? How are you categorized? Are you able to still live your life in a healthy way?" poses Jaynay Johnson, author of *Dear Teen Self* and founder of Teen Talk Therapy, a

Philadelphia-based therapeutic process and educational company geared toward helping teenagers learn how to navigate their lives and be emotionally healthy and responsible.

There's also the fear of being dismissed and misunderstood.

No doubt, you've probably heard people say things like, "You just need to have stronger faith and you won't be anxious anymore" or "Our ancestors survived slavery, so you can deal with being a little sad sometimes." And those statements, even though the people saying them most likely mean well, can make you hesitant to reach out for help, leaving you to keep how you're really feeling hidden inside.

"My mom, she was understanding, but to a certain point. Sometimes she knew I was depressed, but she would say, 'What are you depressed for? You don't have anything to be sad about. I give you this, I give you that,'" says Erin McLaughlin, 21-year-old Philly resident and founder of *Masks & Memoirs*, a subscription box about Black women creatives and self-care. "I'm like, 'It's not about what you get me. You can buy me all the stuff in the world; it's not going to make me happy,'" she continues.

"Sometimes, we don't understand mental illness [as a Black community]. It's hard to accept that you're depressed because your body is just out of whack. You're just trying to figure out why you're feeling the way that you do."

Diagnosed with depression in seventh grade, and later in high school with social anxiety (a nervousness, fear, and discomfort of being judged by others in social situations), Erin explains, "For me, [anxiety is] really strong because it makes me nervous to do mundane things. I was nervous just to go to therapy, so sometimes when I had an appointment, I just wouldn't go."

Her depression often manifested as anger or irritation and led to her picking fights with people, and her severe case of social anxiety was triggered whenever she stepped out of the house. Friendships were nonexistent, the pressures of school were hard to manage, jobs were difficult to maintain, and standing at the front of the bus because it was too crowded was terrifying. "I thought it was just me being shy, but then I realized that as the years went on, it just got worse and worse," she says. "My anxiety makes me think that leaving the house, I'm going to die or some-

thing. It's not even realistic. [Sometimes, I have to] force myself to go outside."

Causes & Effects

In addition to stressors, such as health issues, social events, and family conflict, we're in an era of hyperconnectivity with abundant access to celebrity culture and the lives of others. Toppled with tragedies, such as police killings of unarmed Black and brown people and a controversial and divisive socio-political climate, sirens for mental and emotional discontent are sounding off all over.

"What we're not recognizing is today, there are so many access points to media that there really isn't anything age-appropriate for teenagers," Johnson says. "It goes from kid shows to adult shows. *Sister, Sister*, *Moesha* — these shows had conflict and very different, real ways of handling conflict. Teens just don't have that type of content now that mirrors the experience they're going through."

So, instead of learning ways to manage these emotions, many teens opt to try and suppress them — permanently.

In 2017, 14-year-old high school student Naika Venant committed suicide by hanging

More Ways to Find Help



1. Crisis Text Line. Text HOME to 741741 in the U.S.
2. Safe Place. Visit nationalsafeplace.org or text SAFE and your location to 4HELP.
3. National Suicide Prevention Hotline. Chat online at suicidepreventionlifeline.org or call 1-800-273-8255.
4. The Trevor Project. Help specifically for LGBT youth. Visit thetrevorproject.org or call 1-866-488-7386.

in her Florida foster home. In and out of the system for more than half of her life, Naika had a strained and complicated relationship with her mother she was trying to repair. A string of text messages further revealed her sadness, reports the *Miami Herald*, “Im Just Tired My Life Pointless I Don’t Wanna Do This AnyMore.”

Erin admits, too, that even though she has a good relationship with her family, similar thoughts of suicide entered her mind when she was 16. “I was too scared to do that. [But] I was just so depressed. There were times I’d wake up in the morning and just lay in bed. There were a lot of times in my senior year where I skipped a lot of days because I didn’t feel like getting out of bed.

did a study about how Black youth experience depression. It looks different. They feel more,” Johnson shares. “And maybe not necessarily just being sad because they realize they still have to go out and look the part, but they may say that they feel sick more. More stomachaches, toothaches, headaches. They’re experiencing more physical ailments that would indicate that they are depressed.”

These factors, along with her time spent on social media, hit home for Erin’s journey with anxiety and depression. She became heavily active on social media the summer of 2014, following the death of Mike Brown, an unarmed teen shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. “I got exposure to a lot of social

Coping & Healing

Find your person. That A-1 who will hold you down no matter what — who will listen without judgment. And if it’s you who’s noticing something’s up with someone else, be there for them. “Don’t ignore them. Look and see what the signs are. Always invite them out,” says Francois. “Maybe go to their house and just have a day where you just spend time with them and maybe just watch videos on YouTube or paint a project together, take pictures; do something fun and creative to kind of get them back to a space where they can be happy again.”

Getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and practicing deep breathing, journaling, and other

“Stigma and judgment prevent Black/African Americans from seeking treatment for their mental illnesses. Research indicates that Black/African Americans believe that mild depression or anxiety would be considered ‘crazy’ in their social circles.”

(SOURCE: *Mental Health America*)

I was like, ‘What is the point of any of this?’” she recalls. “I know there’s a lot of other people, especially Black girls, going through this and don’t want to say anything because they think their families are going to brush them off or already have, and they think that there’s nothing out there for them,” Erin continues, voice shaky. “If somebody like me can go through that in high school and now I’m fine — I have my own business, I’m happy, I have friends now; that’s something that people can look forward to, and they don’t have to feel like it’s the end-all-be-all for them.”

Besides what we’ve already mentioned, Johnson says there are several other triggers that can set off anxiety and depression, especially for Black girls. Among the biggest issues? School, hair, colorism, and isolation. “School has become a very anxious environment for a lot of people,” she says. (Girls struggle with whether they’ll be judged for going natural or not, relaxing their hair or not, or wearing weaves or not, for example.) “Rutgers just

issues, and it was depressing to realize and see everything that was going on,” she explains. “I’m still trying to figure out how to have a healthy relationship with social media ... being aware of things, being compassionate, but not letting it consume you and keep you in a constant rage.”

Life changes can also wreck shop on your emotions. Something Johnson shares with her Teen Talk circle is the change in her family structure when she was a teen — a period that ignited her own anxiety. “I had a stepdad, and I really struggled with that. It was such a foreign concept. I didn’t understand what I was supposed to do with this person, and unbeknownst to my mom, I don’t think she really had the tools of navigating how to integrate this person into our lives. I began to have anxiety around going to school and being around other people. I was struggling to eat and that caused me to lose weight, so my appearance was off-key,” she says. “You could tell I was going through something.”

mindfulness activities are also the move. If you find that you’re not quite able to stick to these actions by yourself, though, a therapist can help guide you.

Erin had an on-and-off relationship with therapy and discovered that much of her anger and sadness stemmed from her own insecurities. “I’m dark-skinned. I have big, type four hair, and I’m skinny,” she says. “I think I just projected those insecurities onto other people. Now that I know that I did that, I’m learning to build my confidence.” Journaling also became a release for her to counter her anxiety and depression, and she’s found support within her tight-knit family.

And she wants you to know: “You have power over your situation, no matter how hopeless you feel. Even when you’re depressed, it’s important to fight that urge to isolate yourself because that’s going to make it worse ... It’s important to be around people [you] love and know [you] can trust.”