

Depression and Suicide - How many more must fall?

How many more of our children and colleagues must fall before we give VOICE to the issues of depression and anxiety-related disorders that have led persons to irrational behaviours and suicide?

Persons seldom visit a mental health facility and state, 'I am mentally ill. I need help.' To assume that this is an easy feat to do, is to misunderstand and perhaps trivialize the deep-rooted anxieties associated with mental illness and the social stigmas that prevent persons from seeking treatment. Most persons who access these services are referred by family members or by school personnel. Statistics show that only 20% or less of persons who are troubled, get the help that is needed.

At a recent psychology convention in Pennsylvania, the statistics on depression and suicide among college students revealed that across the US, about 1100 students commit suicide each year. That is nearly 100 students EACH month. For those students with suicidal ideation, the figures multiplied by more than five.

Our Caribbean students who study abroad are easy prey to many of the contributory factors of depression – living far away from home and family for the first time for many, academic problems, little support systems, mood swings, impulsivity issues, disrupted eating, sleeping and exercise patterns, poor coping skills and a sense of isolation and /or talking about death.

At the Convention, one male psychologist highlighted that he had seen an increase in the number of suicides among students from the Caribbean region in recent years. What accounts for this? In my opinion, the fictive kinship patterns of support that our children have at home – tantes, unrelated aunts and uncles who reach out to them – makes it easier to cope at times. In foreign lands, it can be difficult to battle with the pressures, especially among strangers who may bully our intelligent students whom they sometimes see as a threat or those who cope by abusing drugs and substances that lead to hallucinations and irrational coping styles. Parents, if you notice the signs of depression and the risk factors as stated above, go to them or BRING 'EM HOME!

Dr. Margaret Nakhid-Chatoor - Director - MNC Psychological Testing and Counselling Centre

But what can we do as a society to stem this seemingly rising tide of mental illness and depression?

From as early as primary school, start a conversation that problems, conflict and confusion are a normal part of life; that seeking help is a sign of strength, not a weakness. That it is okay to fail. Let our children talk about it! If they don't want to talk as yet, let them listen to the conversations and hear the solutions that are offered.

Many years ago, I pioneered Y.E.S! – Youth Empowerment Series – in some schools where issues were addressed related to all types of abuse, trauma, parental conflicts, grief and loss etc. After each class, students would approach me and ask, 'Miss, how you know my story?' I neither knew them nor their particular issue, but they saw themselves in the situations and it was an opportunity for them to talk about trauma that was seldom spoken about in their homes, schools or even in their churches. Sometimes, even the opportunity to discuss what is going on in their lives, serves as a protective factor.

Depression and mental illness is a public health crisis. There has to be a constant hammering, from all of the podiums – religious, political, social and economic –to eradicate the stigma and to be observant of views that stigmatize, ostracize and prevent persons from seeking help. Insurance companies, get on board and help families to cover the costs of treatment. Schools, have talk sessions among the students – listen to their views.

How many more must fall, before we take serious action against this epidemic?