

2016 Exemplary Award Winner (ENWR105)

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Daily Double: The Effects of Being a Minority Diagnosed with a Mental Health Disorder

Being black has been a social disadvantage in America for centuries because blacks are viewed as lesser by many. Mental health disorders have been continuously swept under the rug for centuries because they are foreign to many and therefore deemed shameful. These are just two examples of aspects of people's identities that have come to define who they are. Because of these social precedents and norms, stigmatization and stereotypes still exist today, dividing society by the different aspects of one's identity. However, there are overlaps. What happens when someone is black and has been diagnosed with a mental disorder- the stereotyping and social condemnation reach an all time high. Minorities in America who suffer from mental health disorders are often invalidated or overlooked due to unfair stigmas and stereotypes placed upon them by society.

While there are many things deemed socially unacceptable that have been kept in the dark, the countless social injustices blacks face is not one of them. It seems that since the birth of America, there has been a civil war, metaphorically speaking of course, between blacks and whites. From slavery to segregation, being black in America has not been easy, and it is still proves to be difficult in modern day. The killing of innocent black civilians has been a recurring issue throughout history. One of the most infamous incidents was the horrific lynching of 14 year-old Emmett Till in 1955 after he allegedly flirted with a white woman. However, these race-fueled killings are at a new high and

have been in social media's spotlight for the past few years with the killing of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many more. These tragic incidents sparked riots, protests, and marches nationwide, coining the phrase, "Black Lives Matter". Because of all this, many black parents have to have "the talk" with their children- and it does not involve birds and bees. Author Dana Canedy discusses these heartbreaking truths in her work, "The Talk: After Ferguson, a Shaded Conversation about Race". These incidents made Canedy realize she had to inform her son about all the unfortunate events and the importance of being cautious as a black male if he encounters police officers. She turned to a fellow black co-worker for advice on when is the right time to have this talk with her son, "Before they were no longer seen as cute" (886). This did not resonate well with her, "I hadn't fully processed that someday my son would be seen as suspect instead of sweet.... I dabbed at my eyes and searched my mind for what to say" (886). After discovering that "[police hurting black people] is not uncommon", Canedy's son, Jordan, said something that astonished and hurt her deeply, "I don't want to be black anymore" (886). This country's injustices have begun to not only tear the country apart, but attempt to diminish black culture and heritage as a whole.

However, what is truly unfortunate, or interesting, depending on how one chooses to look at it, is that it is not simply being black that makes someone a target, it is "looking black", or being of a darker skin tone, that puts them in danger. Take my family and me, for example: my father is half German and half black, and my mother is Puerto Rican, making my sister and me about a quarter black, quarter white, and half Hispanic or Latino. My sister and father are of a darker skin tone, with dark, thick, curly

hair, while my mother and I fairer complexion, with lighter, wavy hair. Because of this, my sister and father are subjected to more prejudices and discrimination, while I, although technically black, receive no unfair treatment simply because on the surface, I do not appear to be black or have dark skin. It is when I am out with my father and sister that I witness racism and prejudice first hand. I have seen my sister have racial slurs yelled at her while walking down the street as well as in school. My father is sometimes pulled over or given poor customer service for no reason other than the color of his skin. Many members of society view people through a color-coded lens, making it nearly impossible to see people as just that- people and nothing else.

Similarly, those with mental health disorders are looked down upon by many members of society because of ignorance and fear of the unknown. Many of those who do not suffer from a mental illness do not know much- if they know anything about them at all- and do not bother to educate themselves on the topic because it is easier to simply shun those with these illnesses. All throughout history, mental health has been something that is seen as unnatural and shameful, although it is quite the opposite, with over 57 million people in the United States diagnosed with a mental disorder of some sort. While society has become more benevolent towards and accepting of those with mental illnesses over the past few decades, there is still so much room for improvement. I have witnessed the prejudices and hardships of having a mental health disorder first hand, living with a mentally ill mother, and having one myself.

My mother was first taken to a psychiatric hospital when I was ten years old. My

sister and I were in foster care and moved around for a year before my mother regained custody of us. This, however, was short-lived due to the growing severity of my mother's mental illnesses, resulting in my father gaining custody. The only consistency in her life was the hospital visits. Because of this, my family began to treat her differently- lesser. When talking about my mother, family members would refer to her as "crazy", "psycho", and many other derogatory terms. Soon enough, I faced these hardships myself. After many months in treatment and outpatient therapy, I was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Phobia, and Panic Disorder, along with Obsessive-Compulsive behaviors. My family did not respond well to this. I was compared to my mother, not only by them, but eventually by myself, out of fear my family had drilled into my head. Many of these judgements and assumptions made were generated from ignorance and misinformation.

However, it was not only from my family that I received different treatment, but from staff and students at school. Whether they were aware of my situation or not, being out of school for over a month created a judgement clouded by stigmas and stereotypes from teachers and faculty. I was treated as though I could not function on my own, spoken to as if I were a delicate newborn, or worse- dangerous. According to the Western Australian Government's Mental Health Commission, two of every three people surveyed felt as if those with mental health disorders were unpredictable, and a quarter felt they were dangerous. Having a disability, especially a mental disability, is seen as an opportunity for society to isolate victims, rather than embracing them and offering help or consolation. Author Judith Newman expresses difficulties her 13 year-

old son faces living with autism in her work, "To Siri, With Love".

While autism is not the same as a mental health disorder, it still receives the same prejudice and discrimination. Newman speaks out about her concerns and struggles raising an autistic child, "Of all the worries the parent of an autistic child has, the uppermost is: Will he find love? Or even companionship" (1022)? While this may seem small or insignificant, it is a window into the minds of others. Parents of those with disabilities, or those who have them, worry about finding companionship of any kind, because they are aware of the light in which others view them. People tend to stray away from those with mental disabilities and disorders because of the stereotypes and misinformation they have been fed by the media. Living with a mental health disorder not only affects one's personal life, but their social life as well. One out of every four people surveyed felt depression was a sign of weakness and would not hire someone with depression, according to the Western Australian Government's Mental Health Commission. It is a prime example of how people define others by their mental state, refusing to see someone for who they are, rather than what they are. While I have witnessed these struggles, my mother knows them much better than I do. Suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and chronic depression is not easy—especially for a Latina, single mother of two.

As I have discussed, dealing with being a minority and having a mental health disorder are difficult in themselves. However, when someone is a minority suffering from a mental health disorder, the prejudice and stereotypes from society are not the

only hardships one may face, but unfair, or even refusal of, treatment from professional mental health institutions themselves. Rachel Ishikawa, a Medical student at Harvard University, wrote an article on the disparities in mental health treatment amongst Latinos in today's society. As of 2014, depression is among the top five leading causes of disability, projecting to be the leading cause within 15 years, with 16 percent of the American population experiencing a depressive episode at least once in their lifetimes. Despite treatment being widely available in the United States, only about half of those with depression will receive treatment (Ishikawa et al., 2014). Surprisingly, while Latinos are more likely to have depression due to low incomes, poor housing, and social discrimination, compared to whites, Latinos receive much less treatment or even referrals.

Professors Thomas McGuire and Jeanne Miranda also wrote on this matter and their findings were astonishing, "Racial and ethnic minorities have less access to mental health services than whites have, are less likely to receive needed care, and are more likely to receive poor-quality care when treated.... After entering care, minority patients are less likely than whites to receive the best available treatments for depression and anxiety" (McGuire and Miranda, 2008). It was also found that mental health care providers may have racial biases stemming from negative stereotypes, stigmas, or statistics, affecting treatment decisions. These disparities are not only unfair and upsetting, but destructive and extremely harmful. Doctors may not realize that the decisions they make regarding a person's treatment affects them immensely; human life is not something to toy with.

These stigmas are much more than words, they have a major impact on the rest of someone's life. Whether it is discrimination and alienation or disparities in treatment of and for those who are less fortunate, stigmas and stereotypes affect a person's life- or worse- ruin it. What can be done to end the social prejudices surrounding minorities with mental health disorders? If society unites together rather than segregating one another, they could all work towards putting an end to these injustices. People can start by properly educating one another on these matters as well as speaking up in defense of those being treated or talked about poorly. These are just small steps to start, but in the end will make all the difference.

Works Cited

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