Lady Sings the Blues

As the high-profile president and owner of her same-named PR firm, Terrie Williams routinely handled the public and professional lives of some of the biggest names in entertainment. Then one day her mask slipped. She was forced to face the pain she'd been hiding.

June 4, 2015 By Kate Ferguson

One day in 2004, Terrie Williams descended into the depths. She went home, drew the blinds, lay down, curled herself into a fetal position and pulled the sheet over her head. Then she dozed off into the darkness. That's where friends found her—three days later. Alarmed, they booked an appointment for her with a therapist, accompanied her there and provided moral support so she'd continue going. "I was diagnosed with clinical depression," Williams says simply.

The clinical depression Williams experienced was the blackest "blues" she'd ever known. Although she could function, the condition negatively affected how she felt, thought and acted. On the outside, she was perceived as a tower of strength; on the inside, she was dying. She'd feel sad and hopeless for prolonged periods of time, sunk in despair and unable to put her feelings into words.

But Williams was not alone. At any given time, almost 5 percent of the U.S. population—or 15 million people—suffer from major depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

"Everyone wears the mask and feels that to have challenges is a sign of weakness," Williams says. "Everyone inherits the unresolved pain and trauma of their parents, so you have very wounded people who are raising children. And they're unable to parent [properly] because they haven't dealt with their issues. All that impacts the kids."

We are unaware that these aspects of depression affect us on a regular basis, Williams says. And when we don't speak about, address and release them, they essentially go unrecognized.

When she started therapy, Williams reflected on the warning breezes that had whipped red flags around her 30 years before while she was still in graduate school. Although she excelled in her studies, she slept all the time. Even when she became a licensed clinical social worker who knew about depression, she didn't connect her situation with that mental condition. What she recalls is being dogged by a nagging feeling that something was wrong. Then therapy named her problem.

In the aftermath of Williams's therapy, once the darkness lifted and she could see the light again,

she began speaking about her experience with clinical depression. While on a C-Span panel, she discussed misperceptions about the condition and explained that sufferers often cope by self-medicating with food, drugs or sex.

After Williams spoke, Diane Weathers, then editor-in-chief of Essence magazine, approached her. She asked Williams to share her story in the publication.

“That’s when the floodgates opened,” Williams says. “People deluged the magazine with thousands of letters. The reaction was stunning and overwhelming.”

As the mail poured in, the reaction sparked a fire in Williams. She began working on a book, Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We’re Not Hurting, a collection of stories about people experiencing depression in the African-American community. Once published, the book birthed a campaign called “Healing Starts With Us,” launched by Williams’s nonprofit organization, The Stay Strong Foundation.

In turn, the campaign generated a series of “Open Book” forums—community gatherings where people share and listen to the testimony of others who have experienced depression. “These are opportunities for people to come forward and speak their truth,” Williams says. “You never know who you’re going to touch when you share yourself or speak about the issue. It’s a huge-ass elephant in the room everywhere we turn.”

To date, the forums proved therapeutic for people in cities across America, enabling them to free the beast within. And the events also inspired the Ad Council, America’s leading producer of public service campaigns, to team with the national government agency Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to launch a mental health campaign targeting young adults in the African-American community.

But Williams also hopes to destigmatize depression among all groups. “People [in general] experience extraordinary pressures every single day,” she says. “So how do they manage that?”

In answer to her own question, Williams is working on another mental health campaign with BET’s Centric, a 24-hour cable entertainment network launched in 2009. This campaign will address different population groups, including young people and the elderly, Williams says.

“We have to break the pain of silence and talk about this stuff,” Williams says. “We have to share our stories with each other so people don’t feel like they’re standing on the ledge alone.”

Part of her effort includes lobbying to get people the mental health care they need. What’s important is to normalize mental health treatment so that seeing a therapist is just like visiting any other doctor, Williams says.

“How is it that it’s much more acceptable to get physical health care and visit a medical doctor, but you don’t get the same reimbursement for mental health care?” she asks.“People are hurting,

and it keeps us from being all that God has called us to be," Williams says. "It's just that simple."

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