

Faith, mental illness, and our community

Written by Dr. Thomas Adams, CEO, African American Family Services
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With the recent Rick Warren interview September 17, 2013 on CNN, the conversation about faith and mental illness has once again gained national attention. Rick Warren, founder and senior pastor of the megachurch Saddleback Church and author of "The Purpose-Driven Life," was interviewed for the first time since his son committed suicide four months ago after a life long battle with mental illness.

As African Americans, we are a people that embody a tremendous amount of faith. A 2009 report found African Americans to be the most 'religious' group of people in the U.S. There are three dynamics that are prevalent for us when we enter into a conversation about mental illness: Faith, Mental Illness and Ethnic Identity.

Most believers in God believe that God can cure us of diseases, disabilities, and other afflictions through prayer. Our faith is put to the test when we become sick, ill, disabled, etc. We wonder if we are not being 'good believers' by seeking outside help to help us with our afflictions.

The subject of mental illness can polarize people. Most of us find that we believe or don't believe in it. Unlike other medical illness that can be seen with the eye (cuts/lacerations, broken bones, chicken pox, etc.), mental illness can elicit doubt about its legitimacy for some.

What is mental illness? The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the authoritative medical manual on mental disorders, defines mental illness as: "A clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress (i.e., a painful symptom) or disability (i.e., an impairment in one or more important areas of functioning) or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom. The syndrome or pattern must not be merely an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event (emphasis mine). It must currently be considered a manifestation of a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual."

It is widely accepted that most individuals who are 'labeled' as having a mental illness are stigmatized: they are thought of as 'less than'. For many, this can make addressing mental illness taboo.

Adding to the complexity of addressing mental illness is the added dynamic of being African American. In a country that is often not accepting or tolerant of African Americans, many of us too, often feel stigmatized as 'less than'. With this stigma that many of us carry, we won't willingly or very easily add the additional stigma that often accompanies being diagnosed as mentally ill. Therefore we often don't acknowledge having a mental illness. We wrestle internally

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with the two thousand year debate between Faith and Mental Illness and this internal debate is even further complicated when our identity and cultural heritage is included.

Is there a quick and easy answer to this debate.....it depends on who you ask. What I believe is that millions of African Americans 'fear' even asking the question because of the double stigma that may be attached to them. African American Family Services helps individuals every day 'wrestle' with these questions, and many others, as we embody our mission "to help the African American individual, family, and community reach a greater state of well-being through the delivery of community-based, culturally specific chemical health, mental health, and family perseveration services.

Please call and/or come by and see us at African American Family Services. Appointments can be made by calling 612-871-7878 or by visiting our Minneapolis location at 2616 Nicollet Ave, 55408.