





Like millions of African Americans, Terrie Williams operated day to day with her game face on. Her struggle with depression is a lesson in truth and healing.

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[S I L E N T P A I N]

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our years ago, Terrie Williams was known as one of the nation's most successful publicists. She had represented a long list of African American celebrities such as Eddie Murphy and Miles Davis. She had it all: money, power, success. Her American Dream had come true. For many, she was the ultimate, "strong Black woman."

But one day Williams' strong exterior cracked and she could no longer pretend to be the ambitious, energetic superwoman people had come to love. For three days, she refused to leave her house, get out of bed, answer the phone or check e-mail. She lay in bed, shades drawn, not caring if she ever got up again. After friends took her to a psychiatrist, Williams was diagnosed with clinical depression.

Today Williams, an author and entrepreneur, is sharing her experience with others. Her book, *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*, is a comprehensive resource on mental health. It includes personal stories from the famous and not-so-famous, as well as a wealth of information about how to get help. As she deals with the daily struggles of life, Williams says her mission now is to "save" Black people during these very desperate times.

What is "Black Pain?"

I think it's the dark space in all of us. I think ultimately that the only difference between a rich person and a poor person, Black, White, Hispanic or Asian who commits suicide after battling depression is really their Zip code. Because dead is dead and pain is pain. And the danger for us as Black people is that we were taught to hide our pain. First by this inhumane system of slavery and then later ourselves, because we just kept it going from generation to generation. So we hide and mask our pain or we think we're hiding and masking our pain. The reality is that it's screaming out at us, everyday, wherever we turn. It's in the workplace. It's in the streets, it's in our homes, it's in our circle of friends, it's just everywhere.

Tell me about your journey, the events that happened in your life that led you to write this book.

I've suffered from low-grade depression over half of my life. I recognized that there was something wrong when I was in graduate school. I found myself sleeping a lot in my room, by

myself in the dark, shades drawn. That led me to seek a therapist, but I wasn't diagnosed with depression. Many of us, we are either undiagnosed or underdiagnosed. I think that all of us inherit the pain of our parents, no matter how loving and well-intentioned they are. What I know is that they did the best that they could. So we inherit their gifts and talents too, but it's the pain and the oppression that we've experienced as a people over centuries that has left this indelible mark. So if you don't ever talk about the things that happened to you, it sits inside you and it festers. We self-medicate through drugs, through alcohol, with food, with gambling, with shopping when we don't have a dime; anything to ease the pain.

I am still traumatized by my first-grade teacher. I was reading in class one day and I mispronounced a word and she didn't allow me to go back. She stopped at that particular point and then called on somebody else. And it's had repercussions in my life. I was always goody-two-shoes, work, work, work, got to be the best student, got to be a class officer, got to do all of that. All I did was work, work, work and put other people before me. I was last on my own to-do-list. And so four years ago I had a major breakdown. And for about nine months, I couldn't virtually function. It was very, very difficult for me. I would wake up in the morning with crippling anxiety, overwhelming sense of dread, not wanting to face the world. It took every ounce of energy that I had to get up because I would lie there for hours in a fetal position, my head under the sheets and crying. I didn't want to answer the phone. It took a lot of energy to get up, shower, dress and then to put the mask on. So it wasn't just how I was feeling, it was the stress of pretending that I was fine, when I was just literally the walking dead. I was highly irritable. I would snap at people. I slept excessively. I ate excessively. I wasn't eating the right foods. I wasn't exercising. I would always marvel — might be going to receive an award, might be going to speak, might be going to a business meeting — and I would just marvel at how that game face, the act, was in full effect: smiling, laughing. And I would literally look at myself and say two hours ago you were on the floor in tears and had no idea how you were going to get here. But what I know is that it was God who ordered my steps. Clearly, I was not operating under my own strength. It was like trying to walk with concrete taped around your ankles, just really hard to move. It was a very, very harrowing experience. I just can't begin to tell you what hell it was and just never thinking I would get to the other side. Sometimes it's very emotional for me to talk about, but what I know is that it's necessary to speak about it. You don't go through the fire and come out on the other side to keep that stuff to yourself. It is meant to be shared because it's too many people needlessly and silently suffering.

When did you decide to get help?

Some friends had to rescue me. I wasn't returning phone calls. My friends came here. They banged on the door. It was really that dramatic. They said you've got to get to a psychiatrist. That was four years ago. That's when I had the breakdown. You lie to your family members. I lied to my parents. I would leave a message when I knew nobody was home because I just didn't want to talk. We lie because we don't want to seem weak or we don't think people want to hear. It's hard to start the conversation. It's hard to when you can't really quite pinpoint it and that's the isolation of it. Three of the hardest words in the English language to respond to are "how are you?" But there were many, many days that I didn't want to be here. I was not that far gone that I would have taken my own life. But I didn't want to be here.



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So you got help.

I just didn't really know what to do. There were times when I was like, it can't be a good thing to wake up like this everyday, just full of anxiety and knots in your stomach. I started going to a therapist and seeing her weekly. We agreed on medication, which I'm still on now. I don't think I'll be on it forever but it's what I needed most immediately to stop the pain or to ease the pain so I could function better. Then we kind of sabotage ourselves. I wasn't going to my appointments regularly, I would cancel them.

Why did you sabotage yourself?

The work was more important. My business was more important, servicing those clients so that I would be too busy to get up and go to my therapy appointment. So I would cancel. I knew it wasn't cool and the therapist even said that to me. But it was the work that was calling me. Then I found a therapist who I adore. She's committed to helping me through this even though she moved. And she said to me one day when I was skipping appointments with her, "Let me see if I understand this, it's more important for you to go to these events, be a fraction of who you want to be than to commit to coming here each week to heal." And I had no words. She had just called me out and I totally got it. And [I've been] on point ever since, that was a very important shift for me. We all think that we don't have time to give to ourselves. I've heard many people say, "I don't have time to be depressed." What I'm saying is that the mask is going to crack one day. I can promise that because I'm

a living, breathing example. I can't tell you how much mail I get all the time from people about this. You will die trying to be superman or superwoman. Everybody's walking around with their game face on, passing for normal and you think they really got it going on and they're dying inside. Everybody is dealing with stuff. Whether you're that young brother or sister who's gangbanging on the street, all the way up to the most successful and who I call, a lot of times, bourgeois Negroes who think that their material things, their toys, they think that they cushion the pain, but I still see it. I still see it when you're driving your half a million-dollar car. I still see it.

You talk about a "mask." Tell me about it.

This mask is what we feel that we need to get through our everyday lives. It's the mask that says that I'm fine, that I'm confident, that I am accomplished. That's what the mask says. And you may very well be those things, but the reality is many times you feel like a fake and you don't really feel that way about yourself. You can't give anyone in this highly competitive world an edge over you. So dare you say, even intimate that you are less than perfect, there goes your edge, there goes your career. When I went to a holiday party with someone, a couple of people asked me questions about my book and I answered them. I went into the kitchen and this sister who's 20 years old, follows me into the kitchen and she says, "Thank you for what you said," and she then tells me that she had to take two semesters off because of her depression. She was in a psych ward and she said it was the first time that she felt like she didn't have to wear a mask because everybody else there, in varying degrees, was like her.

You decided to write a book. Why?

I wrote it because I received over 10,000 letters in response to an *Essence* article [published in 2005]. People telling me that they thought they were alone. I wrote it because I love my people and we're dying. We are in a state of emergency. Our pain is screaming out at us every single day.

Tell me about your tour that launched this year.

The "Healing Starts With Us" tour was launched March 18 at a fitting place that needed healing, the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was assassinated. It's now called the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center. We're in the process of raising money to take it across the country, a 50-city tour. But there's always some version of it. Requests come in all the time for me to come and speak, so when those occur we work out something with that particular entity. But the feel of [the tour] is — names and faces that you know [celebrities] who read a story in the book and then we open the floor for testimony.

Mental health issues aren't really talked about in the Black community. It's a taboo subject. Why do you think that's so?

It's really considered a sign of weakness. People will think I'm crazy. I can't afford to seem weak. It would ruin my career. It would hurt my family. And because we are a faith-based people, to do anything other than to pray to God is a betrayal. We have a basic mistrust of the medical establishment because of things like that Tuskegee experiment, and so many Black men dying. We would rather tell someone that we have a relative in jail or

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on drugs before we would speak about mental illness. But also for so many of us, it's very environmental. It's very social. And when you have to be 10 times better than your White counterpart it takes a toll and if you're not talking about it, the mask will crack one day. There was an article a few years ago in the Associated Press and it was about how Black men quietly combat stereotypes. Various men were interviewed. One Black man said he stands differently so that he doesn't intimidate others, smiling extra, and if you have a big booming voice, you lower it so that you do not intimidate folks. Another one wears suits on the weekend when he travels because he knows that it requires respect. There's a brother that I know who says that when he has his yoga mat under his arm, he feels that he's more acceptable. Another brother I know who writes, said that a White guy that he really, really likes and respects, when he started to lock his hair, the guy says, "What is this now, your thug look?" And it hurt him. Those shifts that we make, it's second nature to us. What we don't know is how it's killing our spirits. We think it's rolling off our backs but it really isn't.

What impact does this have on the Black community, on families?

It's destroying us. We're beyond the crisis stage. It is a state of emergency. We're dying everyday by our own hands. The violence that we witness everyday in our communities, we think that, too, rolls off our backs because we're wearing the mask but in fact what used to be a criminal justice problem is now a public health problem. If you have been a victim of violence yourself or you know

someone, you suffer from what you call post-traumatic stress disorder. And often it means the inability to function, to concentrate, horrific nightmares and so you're in an environment where bullets are just your every day. So then what happens is our kids disproportionately get labeled ADD, ADHD; bright as hell, just can't function. And then mommy and daddy are dysfunctional so what do you do? So, we're seeing the disintegration of our community. You hear things about it's gun control. No, we are a people in pain with nowhere to go because nobody is talking about it. It's not the guns. It's the anger. It's chronic anger.

How did writing this book help you?

Going through this experience, helped me to understand what I was called to do. That's the first thing. It was necessary. I am getting emails and letters from people everyday saying "thank you for letting me know I'm not alone." So it is really just my trying to do my part to give people permission to speak about it and understand that they're not alone. We're just moving, just doing what we do. We are walking pressure cookers. We don't go to therapy. We don't have any experience with it. A White colleague will tell you they can't go to a staff meeting or whatever because they have their therapy appointment and they will tell you what antidepressants they're on. We're not there yet.

From your book and the initial tour, what are you learning?

We're really all the same. We're all very fragile and we all basically want the same things and that's to be loved and cared for and need to just connect with human beings. There are so many people who are not connected. You read often times about people like the Virginia Tech murderer [Seung-Hui Cho], the Columbine situation and they are people who are not connected and who are different and people look at them and treat them differently. It really bothers me when people who commit horrific crimes are so maligned. They are called monsters, subhuman. I'm not talking about excusing what they did. I'm talking about explaining. There's a reason. I don't think people are just born mad, bad or evil. I think horrible, horrible things have happened to people and they're still standing. And they walk around with their game face on, passing for normal, dying inside. They are dead inside, so your life doesn't matter.

What are your goals? What do you hope to accomplish by doing this?

Save our souls, plain and simple. Save our souls. Until I begin to see more healthy communities, I can't stop the work. There's so much work to be done. Sometimes I tire of speaking. But it's what we have to do. Everybody has to, within your world, whatever your world is, do what you can do to help address this issue because it's everywhere. It's really just about getting people taking up their part, to try and create healing circles in their homes, in their work spaces and give people an opportunity to share with one another. The healing starts with us and it's only going to happen one person at a time. No matter how successful we become, it doesn't matter if you're not mentally and emotionally healthy. ■