Speaking the Unspeakable: A Cultural Contextual Understanding of Black Youth Suicide

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What's Going On?

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In the US, the suicide rates for Black children between the ages of 5 and 11 years-old has been increasing between 1993 – 1997 to 2008 – 2012, while the rates for White children has been decreasing.

What's Going On?

- In the US, suicide was the 2nd leading cause of death for Black adolescents and youth between the ages of 15 – 24 years-old in 2015. Use of guns or suffocation were the most common methods of suicide.

What's Going On?

- 126% increase in suicide rates for Black youth between the ages of 15 – 19 years-old (2018)

- 233% increase in suicide rates for African American and Caribbean-born Black children between the ages of 10 – 14 years-old (2018)

Recent Social Realities

- Disproportionate numbers of Black people dying from COVID-19

- Increased unemployment for Black people; heightened risk for food insecurity, unstable housing, and effects of DV which increases during financial hardship

- Race-Based violence

What's Going On?

While these alarming statistics highlights the urgent call to action, we must ask ourselves if the statistics alone adequately equip us to effectively prevent Black youth suicide.

What's going on?

This questioning begs for the absolute need to understand these statistics within the cultural context in which Black youth live so that effective prevention and intervention strategies can be developed.

Cultural Contextual Issues

- Critical factors contributing to Black youth suicide as framed by ecological model:
  - Multigenerational Cultural Trauma (Chronosystem and Macrosystem Levels)
  - Community Violence (Mesosystem Level)
  - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Stress-response Patterns (Person Level)
  - Systemic and Institutional Violence (Exosystem and Mesosystem Levels)
  - Bullying (Microsystem Level)

Black Teens Face Racial Discrimination 5 Times A Day On Average

Researchers also found that being the target of daily discrimination has led to depression in these teens.

Risk Factors

- No currently identified risk factors specifically for Black youth
- The following provides an overview of some general risk factors
- As a reminder, suicide is a complex event that is not tied to just one factor
- An additional contextual factor is that the risk factors may pertain to the young person and/or their family history

Protective Factors

- Cultural grounding and affirmations can help Black youth develop the psychological "armoring" that many older Black people have developed to cope with oppression

- Close relationships with family or others can protect Black youth against perceiving that suicide is the only way out in response to stress and trauma

Warning Signs

- Suicide risk for Black Youth is impacted by not only risk factors but also cumulative effects of chronic and acute stress ("stressed out")

- Stressors and trauma affecting the individual may also occur on a communal level and ways the community response may or may not impact the individual

- Black youth are growing up in a society that negates, neglects, and attacks them. Stressors resulting from institutional racism may include:
  - Academic challenges without adequate school resources
  - Police violence

Prevention & Intervention Strategies

- Developmental Considerations
- Need to consider within the context of broader social, historical, and structural forces.
  - If this is not done, it perpetuates the focus on the individual when it is the context which should occupy equal if not greater attention
  - Contextual understanding expands the list of predictors, mediators, and moderators of Black child suicide
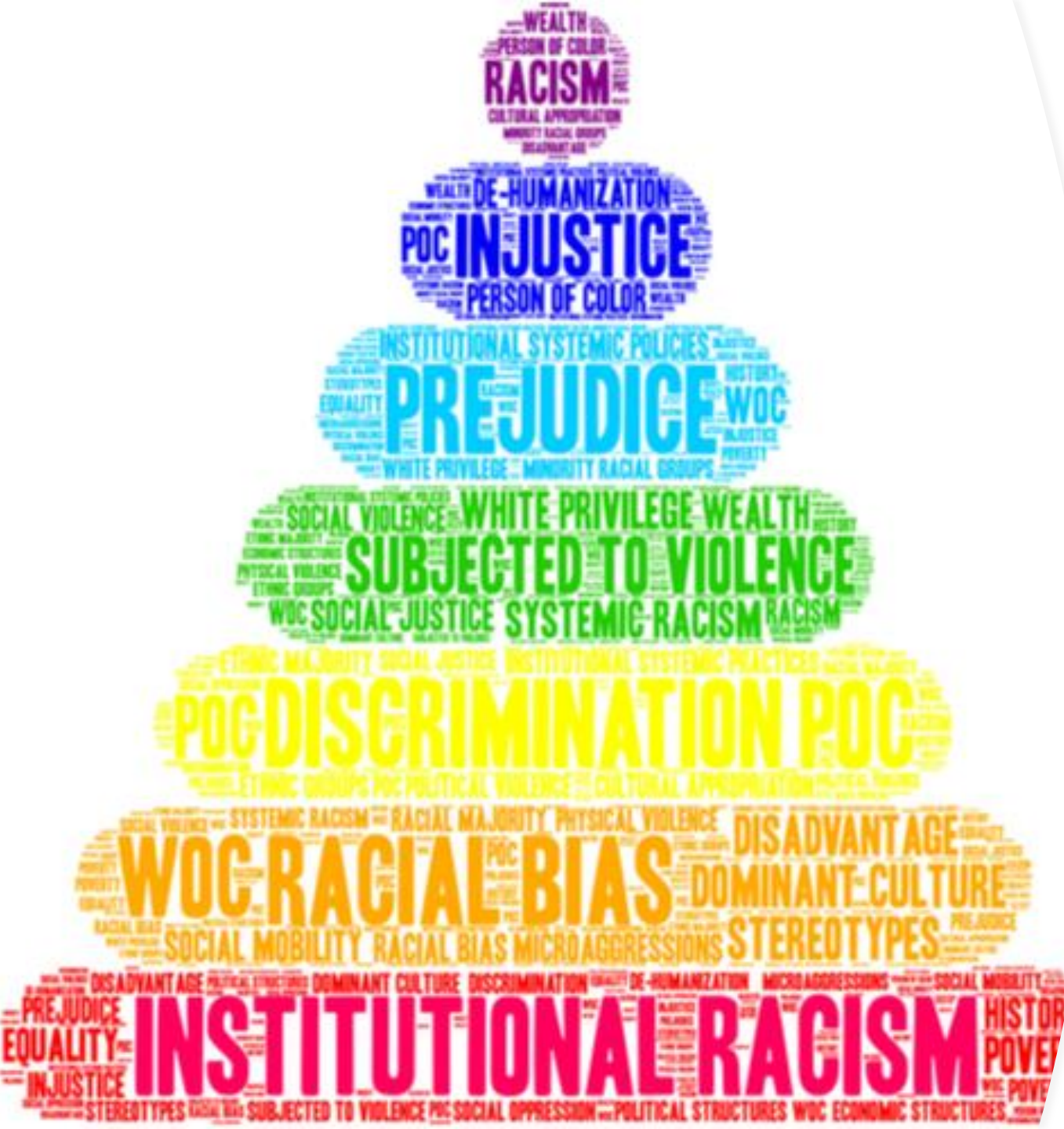
Prevention & Intervention

In addition to understanding the contextual influences on Black youth suicide, it is also essential to also address:

- structural racism

- social determinants of health

- mental health stigma

- help-seeking

- culturally tailored treatment opportunities within the context of history, socio-ecological environment, and generational shifts

Prevention & Intervention

It Takes a Village

- Not just mental health professionals, all hands-on deck in the village or community to support healing

Family: Caring for the Caregivers

- As having a supportive caregiver can mitigate the impact of toxic stress in youth, it is important if possible, to involve the caregivers in the healing process

- In working with caregivers, necessary considerations include:

    - stress caregiver may be experiencing of childrearing particularly in an environment that is hostile to Black people

    - challenges of balancing child's innocence with concerns for mortality and need to have "the talk"

Prevention & Intervention

- Given these issues, it may be helpful for schools to offer workshops to caregivers about ways to support their child and themselves within the context of environmental considerations
    - may provide an opportunity to receive information to support their child and themselves as many parents often have unresolved trauma histories that are more extensive/severe than theirs

Prevention & Intervention

- First Responders MUST convey a sense of respect and compassion for Black youth regardless of their life circumstances (e.g., gang and/or foster care involvement)
  - "I see you. I hear you. I am here for you."
  - As contextual factors have a major impact on functioning, it is crucial to couple individual support for Black youth with advocacy for systemic change in schools, medical/mental health care, law enforcement, child protective services, etc.
  - Trainings for First Responders/Professionals of Trauma as well as Suicide Prevention within a Cultural Context

Prevention & Intervention

- Public education postings
- Validated measures for identifying suicide risk for Black youth
- Culturally specific and developmentally appropriate social media-based interventions

Prevention & Intervention

Mental Health or Wellness Trainings for students as well as for community members at places such as Parks & Recreation Centers, beauty shops, barber shops, etc.

Prevention & Intervention

- If you suspect that someone else or even yourself experiences thoughts of suicide, GET HELP IMMEDIATELY!
  - If while at school, a School Administrator (Principal or AP)
  - Hospital Emergency Room
  - Department of Mental Health Access Hotline
    - 1 (800) 854-7771
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
    - Call or Text 988 (24 Hours A Day/7 Days A Week)
    - Contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741

Questions/Comments

Contact Information
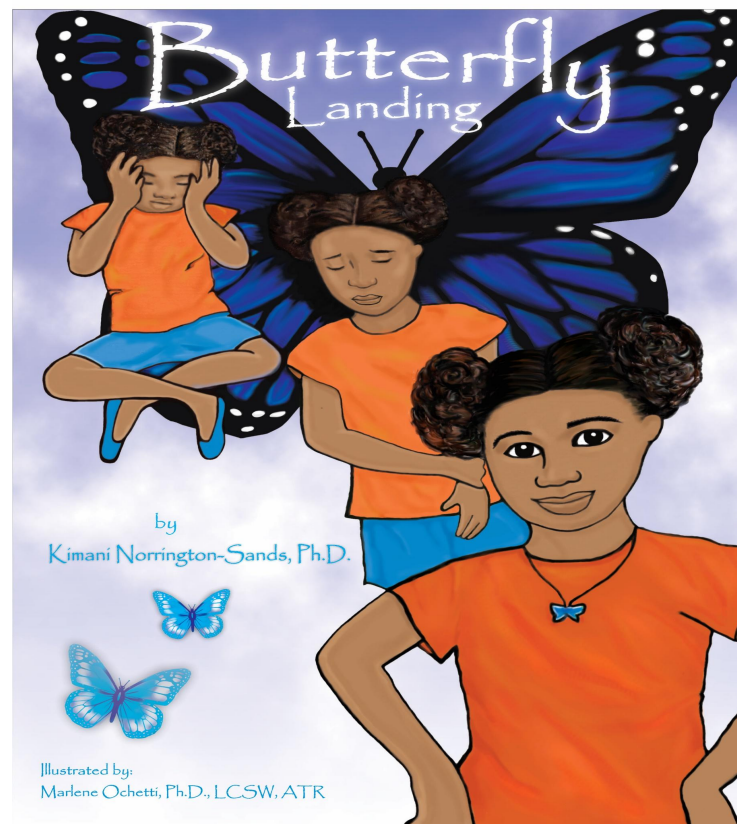
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Book:

Butterfly Landing (available on Amazon)