

Mentality of mental health: the brave ones are out there

by Tambu Muzenda (South Africa)

It was late December 1999, and I knew I had hit rock bottom. The day remains a fuzzy memory, but I knew my life would change. I wanted to die so badly, and I had taken interest in animating this process in my head; the option of jumping over the bridge had since passed; an overdose seemed easier given accessibility to street drugs in Vancouver. Mine would be amongst the many unclaimed Jane Doe bodies collected from the downtown east side of Vancouver. I had seen people using drugs, zoned out for the world, I imagined they had not a care in a world that had forgotten and forsaken them. A glazed look into no man's land was what I yearned for on this day and prayed that it would lead to my final demise. Depression had taken over my life and I had to stop these sad feelings from consuming me. What transpired on this day, my desire for life and need to speak out took a turn for the best. But the journey of recognising and accepting mental illness or disorder is never an easy one. I would learn to manage and sometimes not manage my mental disorders. My worst fears of depression and anxiety for the next ten years and managing it over time, is the background to this story. The thought of seeing a shrink was a western ideal, or was it? I didn't know of any black person that had shared their therapy passage with a psychiatrist or psychologist. I don't recall talk of this nature and even now, mental health remains a secret, where most suffer in silence until the mind breaks. As a child, I was always a queer or rather excitable human being. The attention I received bothered me somehow. I was energetic and played out that energy, yet the perplexed looks and human monitoring on the school grounds, church, class and even at home left me confused. I felt irritated, as though there was something not right with me.

For many years, I was bothered by numerous things including the colour of the sun. Whilst energetic as a child, when I grew older, I became rather quiet and took much time away from other kids my age. I found solace in reading and even dreaming of kissing the charming princess. My future confused me and I felt hopeless. I was not interested in anything and I just felt odd as though I lived in a bubble that would burst. Things I didn't understand made me sad or irrationally angry. My teenage years were plagued with thoughts of killing myself. Life didn't move the same as with my peers. When I was alone, I would burst into tears for no reason and then I knew I was not OK. But for a black girl growing up in Zimbabwe at the time, mental health was never discussed openly. The only way out was to shut down and play along as if life was blissful. I felt invisible to the world. In 1996, I got married and moved to Canada - even though I knew I was unhappy, I did it anyway.

With a renewed sense of purpose, my husband and I set about exploring this new world. My mind was so occupied learning different things and ways in North America. Biscuits as I knew them, were cookies in this country. Biscuits in Canada were either meant for dogs or found in bakeries as scones. Funny, right? It was euphoric and I couldn't contain myself. The high-rise buildings, blue waters, sandy beaches, nude beaches and the idea of seeing a bear on Vancouver Island was such a thrill. The white mountains of snow in Whistler - what a spectacular scene. I learnt how to ski after several falls on the white powder. But my mood was on high alert as it changed, just like the weather in these parts. The daylight savings and greyness fascinated me for a little while and then I withdrew from it all. I had nothing to share other than this hole of despair, fatigue and anxiety that haunted me most days. I was unemployed, unable to work as a landed immigrant. I got bored easily as the excitement fell away. The panic attacks began to haunt me in public spaces. A particularly unforgettable experience at a hockey game stands out. The loud cheers of the crowds sent such piercing noise to my ears I felt the walls caving in and I could not breathe. The thrusting and thuds of hockey sticks and the puck on iced floors left me drenched in sweat and feeling faint. I don't remember how the game ended. I know how immobilised and helpless I felt being in those crowds. I wanted to die.

My weight and sexuality bothered me, whilst my partner went on about the wonders of life. Dying, dying, oh how I just wanted to die. Burrard Bridge was the favourite spot for those tired of living. My

concern was the distance from the bridge rails to the bottom of the freezing water. "How would my body be found?" I thought. "What if I survive by some fucked up twist of fate?" I also wondered what those who knew me would say, especially having to face them if I survived. What would I say to my parents and siblings? That I was feeling crazy and helpless. That I was hearing voices and had to keep calm by hurting myself. You see I was so tired of hitting myself and cutting my body. I had to end it all, at the bridge where I passed on many days and gazed at the waters below. There were times I listened to the news announcement of another jumper and envied their bravery. Or was it? But I was just another black woman waiting to make the statistics. What had happened to me? I spent most of my time watching reality television bonding with Oprah Winfrey and Dr Phil, relating to many people not coping with mental illness. I connected with those feelings of worthlessness. Like most participants on the show, life was at a standstill. The thought of using drugs to numb the pain and unworthiness drove me crazy to a point where I faced my reality whilst on the downtown East side of Vancouver. What saved me that day was my fear of needles! I was not going to be a statistic for fear of judgement or the fact that I didn't know who to talk to about this mental matter. Within a week, I was booked with a psychiatric for assessment. I met him four times before he concluded that I would be fine with the anti-psychotic medicine, Clozapine. The medication made me feel better on some days whilst weeping on others, for a period of a year. I felt restless, had a dry mouth often and zoned out in between summer days and winter nights. There were side effects on my sex life with low libido and dry privates. I would try several medicines over the years until I got the right one to manage my depression and panic attacks.

This process also allowed me to address groups of people like me, a young black woman challenging stigma on mental health. The statistics from WHO¹ show that mental health disorders affect more than 300 million people globally, the Africa region shows only 9% reported. Whilst it might seem like a low number to the global statistics, I know that the silence about mental health in my community makes these numbers even lower. I did not speak to my partner about my depression and anxiety. Over the first few years of treatment I only shared with my doctor, and three other close friends.

Ultimately, I realised the value of taking a vulnerable position to mental health disorders which gave me the courage to speak openly to friends and colleagues about depression and anxiety. These opportunities can take many forms and happen at various times in one's life. Whilst I had managed my situation in Canada; upon return to South Africa in 2006-7, I had a severe relapse.

At first I felt ashamed, but as I grew stronger I shared with a few friends and then it became the norm. Whilst everyone else went on about their lives, I took charge of mine. I popped my Celexa 20mg for some time until I felt better. I reduced the dose to 10mg as I gained control and adjusted to life back in South Africa. My confidence grew – friends began to share their own mental health challenges – for example, a woman who had just become married, suffered from depression for many years and had resorted to self-medicating with alcohol to manage her anxiety. I have no doubt that I know many black women who suffer from mental health issues and hardly discuss them. The stigma that comes with mental health is certainly a reason for the silence, including gendered norms of motherhood and women in general. The results of those who suffer in silence are damaging to an illness that is treatable. As I recover, I know that we must continue to talk about mental health issues to find a holistic approach that gives perspective to the environments that we occupy.

Whilst recovery is possible, the impact of depression & anxiety cannot be dealt with in solitude. Through sharing my story, I hope someone has the courage to break their silence, and create a space that speaks openly to mental health wellness. This is my story and I am sticking to it.

¹ WHO, 2017- WHO/MSD/MER/2017.2