



# Depression On Campus

## The Truth About College Stress and What to Do About It

By Terrie M. Williams

*Author of Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*

What an accomplishment it is that you've made it to college. It's a great place to be in your life and a time sure to present you with life changing discoveries about who you are and the possibilities of what you can do. Along the way, you may have had challenges that, if not properly dealt with, could derail you from your academic focus. Truth be told, college life is hard. As much as we want to believe the experience to be the stereotypical wild, freewheeling, independent time of our lives, the reality is it's a lot of work—hard work. Sometimes, the demands, anxiety, and responsibilities of pursuing higher education becomes too much to handle, easily plunging you into depression with no clue what to do about it. I can relate.



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When I was a college student, I strutted around campus always sporting what I today call my "game face." You know, that "everything's alright with me" look that you show the world even though you feel the complete opposite inside. I never headed to class without my mask. Instead, I hid my pain, behaving as if nothing was wrong. I was a model student, though dying inside, and nobody knew it but me. When I think back and remember the young woman wearing that mask, I know it wasn't the real me. But she was seriously in denial.

Since then, for more than 30 years, I had no idea that I needed help sorting out my feelings, or how to ask for it. But when I collapsed in a meltdown that had been building up in me since my college years that had me balled up in bed unable to get out for days. I finally got treatment and my breakdown became a breakthrough. You or someone you know might be in or headed toward a similar predicament. It doesn't have to be that way.

### WHAT'S GOING ON?

Though we fool ourselves into thinking that we can figure out how to cope with our feelings on our own, the truth is that ignoring it, engaging in destructive behavior, and not getting professional help can do some serious damage. Check out what's going on at college campuses all over America:

- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among people under the age of 25, and the second leading cause of death among college students.
- Nearly half of all college students report feeling so depressed at some point that they have trouble functioning.
- 1 out of 4 young adults will experience a depressive episode by age 24.
- 60% of students reported feeling things were hopeless one or more times during the last school year/

Depression is nothing to play with. I know that sometimes you become so overloaded with assignments, extra-curricular activities, and jobs, that you probably reach the point where you think, "If I have to write one more paper, read one more book, or one more whatever, I'll snap!" It's not easy to juggle so many things at once and the effort can be overwhelming, if not mentally and physically exhausting. And many times, the demands of college are not the only things you're dealing with.

Several months ago I spoke at an event and openly discussed my personal battle with depression with a group of brilliant college students from various colleges around the nation. They were so inspired that many of them got beyond their trauma, their shame and spoke, for the first time, about their own despair and the challenges they're up against: issues ranging from sexual abuse and promiscuity, poverty, parental neglect/abandonment, eating disorders, violence, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse. All it took was for one person to speak up, lifting the stigma, and then it became a pass the microphone situation where everybody felt empowered and relieved to unload.

For black college students, there are additional factors that can trigger the onset of depression. Many students who attend predominantly white schools report feelings of social isolation, the pressure to "represent the race" at all times, to take on the personal mission of combating racial stereotypes; and oftentimes black male students speak about feeling the need to "adapt," or diminish themselves in the presence of whites in order to appear less threatening to them. Add all this to the pressures of college studies and that's a lot on one's mind. No wonder the pot boils over. And as headlines constantly highlight the troubles of today's youth the message is clear that so many of you are hurting. Acting out is a desperate way of screaming for help, as one suffers in what appears to be silence.

SPEAKING OUT

Here's what a few special young people in my life have shared about their experience with depression:

*"When my depression got so bad that I stopped going to my classes, I told my professors I had the flu. When I stopped getting out of bed, I lied to my friends about what I had done that day. And when the anxiety got so bad that my heart began to hurt, I went to the doctor in search of anti-anxiety medication. She explained the high prevalence of anxiety and depression on college campuses in America and recommended that I go to the counseling services. I wish I sought care sooner, but I was embarrassed. Sadly, my embarrassment almost cost me my life. Going to school on a mostly white campus, I didn't want to complete white stereotypes of a black woman: troubled. I also didn't want to appear what is dreaded the most among many Black circles, including my own: weak." – Courtney Evans*

*"I was so afraid to share my story and I'm sitting here crying just thinking about where I have come from and what is in store for me. My father was a molester and physically abusive. My mother didn't have much so we had to split up amongst family members. I never went to a psychologist; I just kind of dealt with the cards that were handed to me. I am not very open about personal matters; I tend to keep it hidden so that everyone can see that I have it all together. But, I learned so much from your strong words and life changing stories. I feel I have a reference now to relate to women who have experienced and endured pain on another level and used it to build on their dreams."*

*"The fact that people had the courage to express themselves openly about problems or even relate to someone else in any kind of way offered deep cleansing and healing."*

I applaud all the brothers and sisters who finally spoke out. This is a key first step. Unfortunately, many students feel embarrassed and are unaware of the resources available to help them.

## GETTING HELP

In the instance of depression, silence is never golden. If you are feeling depressed, overwhelmed with school or burdened by other troubles, there is help. There are many resources ready and willing to help you through, but you have to step forward. As a survivor of depression myself, I know that admitting that you have a problem is very hard, but I encourage you to do just that so that you don't have to go on suffering, limping through each day. You don't have to feel embarrassed because you are not alone. So many of your peers are going through the same thing and not handling it too well.

Depression is a problem that mental and emotional health professionals are trained to help you manage. I encourage you to seek treatment. For help coping with school stresses or with bouts of depression, you can also reach out to a friend or family member and confide in them about how you honestly feel. In addition, check your campus for these resources:

- College transition programs
- Counseling, psychiatric and psychological services
- Dormitory director or assistant director
- Student organizations that promote cultural, religious, racial, or social unity
- A trusted professor or staff member
- Advising staff including deans, counselors, and student activities coordinators
- Mentors
- Spiritual, religious, or inter-faith groups

You don't have to pretend anymore; you don't have to maintain the façade of lies to yourself and others. As you move forward in your college studies and managing all your responsibilities, it will serve you well to remember to take good care of your inner self. That begins with facing your feelings and doing something about it whenever you feel yourself sinking. You have the power to remove your mask, to get the help you need to pick yourself up, and to allow your soul to breathe free. Yes, college is hard and life has its challenges, but I have all the faith in the world that you will make it through the fire and emerge, degree in hand, as a whole, healthy individual ready to take on the world.



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