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Latina feminist mental health activist and suicide attempt survivor.

## People of Color Deal With Mental Illness, Too

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Williams' suicide, there have been countless articles written about mental illness and suicide. I don't remember so much attention being placed on this subject before and I am thankful for it. More people are talking about self care and mental health resources that are available for those with and without insurance. Aside from news outlets, companies are donating proceeds of their sales to mental health research and mental health organizations. One example is Philosophy's [Hope & Grace Initiative](#). Again, I am very grateful for this. However, take a look at their PSA: <https://youtu.be/xVXhHEFD0ic>

Does anything jump out at you? Anything at all? Well, all of these stories are from white women. Granted, women are being represented but there is still a larger group that is not being catered to: women of color. One might view this as a petty issue but this brings up a larger problem.

The media representation of mental illness constantly excludes, ignores and silences people of color. White women are stereotypically the face of mental illness. There are media representations like Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight* and even more recently, Carrie in *Homeland*, and Pat and Tiffany in *Silver Linings Playbook*. Even when it comes to the news reports of these tragic shootings recently, when it is a white male there is the immediate speculation that he is mentally ill. Yet, when Black or Latino men commit crimes, they are just that: criminals.

There is a stigma that is rampant in our society towards mental illness. Yet it is worse for communities of color. Mental illness doesn't discriminate but people do. People of color in the United States battle with micro-aggressions, cultural, religious, language barriers and negative stereotypes. That compounded with a mental illness is debilitating. White individuals do not deal with the issues we face.

As people of color, we are proud individuals who have accomplished a lot despite the obstacles that we have faced. We don't need another reason for people to ostracize us and treat us differently. We are not supposed to air our dirty laundry. But we have a larger problem in our hands that is more important than saving face. We are losing countless individuals due to the silence and shame that contributes to the high suicide attempt and success rate. I do want to be clear: I am in no way blaming these communities. The invisibility of people of color in this discussion is to blame. How can we destigmatize this in our community if we are never shown in its representation? Being witness to the killings of Travon Martin, Eric Garner, and Tanisha Anderson, takes its toll. How can the mental health of people of color be made a priority in our communities when we are constantly shown that our lives don't matter, that we can be killed senselessly, that justice won't be served?

The health disparities and the lack of resources being made available to our community is a huge part of it as well. Cultural competency is lacking immensely. Simply translating resources and information is not enough. It is not cognizant of people's different cultural identities. In my experience, working with groups and organizations that focus on mental illness, I am told that they want to be inclusive when I bring up a support group for solely people of color or that amplifying the voices of people of color are their priority right now. The advocacy that is needed to heal our community is different.

In response to this disparity and the state of mental health for my community, I have started a [photo project](#) to juxtapose the media representation of mental illness. I am hoping that this project will let others know that they are not alone. I want my community to know that this is not something to be ashamed about. This is *not* a white person's disease. Countless individuals have shared their support and expressed their content for a project that focuses on their mental health needs.



There are many ways to remove the stigma of mental illness in communities of color. Why not start here? I know it's not a simple task. It's going to take time to change the norms but we need to get started now. We have to acknowledge that people experience mental illnesses differently so we can find a solution, otherwise the solution will be centered on the needs of white people which has been the case all along. I can't help but wonder if it hadn't been the suicide of a white man, would we be talking about this?

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