

# EDITORIAL

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## Suicidal symptoms of black teen-agers may differ from whites'

BY KAREN PIROZZI  
OF THE AMERICAN NEWS SERVICE  
African-American teen-agers contemplating suicide may not receive the help they need because their behavior doesn't fit a model of suicidal teens based primarily on white, middle-class youth, says George Washington University psychology professor Sherry Davis Molock.

When a child appears sad and withdrawn, other people may recognize the symptoms as possible indications of depression and, as such, question the child carefully to see if suicide is on his or her mind, said Molock. But when a child behaves defiantly and opposes authority, it's unlikely

parents, teachers and possibly even mental health professionals will consider the need to evaluate the possibility of suicide, said Molock. "There's evidence that in this (African-American) culture, depression may be expressed in a different way, and that African-American adolescents are more likely to have conduct problems when they're depressed," she said. "We do know that depression occurs in a cultural context."

Molock says it is important for people working with teens to recognize these differences among races and explore underlying reasons for a wide spectrum of behaviors, whether they appear to stem from sadness, anger or defiance. An understanding of cultural issues surrounding depression will help professionals treat African-American young people appropriately. The suicide rate among African Americans is increasing dramatically each year, says Molock, citing a 1998 national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finding that suicide is the leading cause of death among black youth 15 to 24. During the last three decades, suicide rates have increased by 93 percent for black females and by 214 percent for black males. While blacks still commit suicide less frequently than whites, the gap is closing.

Also, the actual number of suicides among black adolescents may be higher than official reports indicate, Molock said. Many young people die in instances described as "victim-precipitated homicides." Though the young people technically are killed by another person, they have put themselves in harm's way because they no longer want to live, she explained. For example, she added, a drug-dealer patient of a colleague died of a gunshot wound. One of his friends, another drug dealer, in a state of great distress entered "enemy territory" and fell asleep standing up. He was shot and killed before morning. "This kid was streetwise and savvy. He knew he couldn't do that and expect to live through it," Molock said. "His family agreed that he just didn't want to go on." While this youth probably wouldn't have admitted his suicidal feelings, Molock said, she considers it a form of suicide nonetheless. Molock said to address the needs of such young people, the mental health community must look outside the traditional models of treatment.

According to Molock, the black community remembers past abuses and still holds some justified distrust of the white mental health establishment, and this distrust inhibits blacks from seeking treatment. And more important, this establishment may not recognize how a history of oppression and racism influences the experience and needs of African Americans. Black churches, which have long served as providers of social services, have programs available to young people whether or not they belong to the congregation.

"There's a lot in the community that mental health professionals don't know about," Molock said. Many churches have mentoring programs,

midnight basketball and other offerings that provide youth with a place that's safe and where they can feel

someone cares for them. One of Molock's African-American clients, a prime candidate for victim-precipitated homicide, found support at a church-based Rites of Passage program, she said. Here he found mentors who taught him about his African-American heritage and helped him research his art form, rap music, and trace its connection to African traditions. He also found a sense of purpose in teaching younger children to create, record and publish their own raps.

"It made a big difference for him, because he was really interested in how his music connected to Africa," Molock said. "He was taught that you come from a proud line of ancestors and that when you don't live up to your potential you let them down, and that you let down the next generation that won't have your strengths as a resource."

"It was the first time he really felt connected to the community and the first time he talked to other kids who had feelings similar to his own."

Another program offered through a church provides resources primarily for women, but also has been helpful for adolescent girls. SHOUT (Sisters Helping Others Understand Themselves) addresses depression and suicide within a cultural framework, said Michele DeLeaver Balamani, director of Baraka Pastoral Counseling and founder of Dancing On Our Graves Institute for Life Enrichment.

Small groups of women or girls, she said, trace their lives, examining their strengths, trials and available support systems, Balamani said. They go through a series of steps that culminate in accepting accountability for addressing issues in healthier ways.

Women who have completed the program have started businesses, changed careers and left or changed unhealthy relationships, Balamani said. Although it was started to address depression among church-going women who may feel ashamed to be depressed, viewing it as a sign of less-than-rock-solid faith, it has worked well for younger girls.

"This is absolutely a model for suicide prevention for African Americans. It takes their cultural heritage into account. It includes discussion of the history of slavery and looks at oppression as a life issue."

*"There's evidence that in this (African-American) culture, depression may be expressed in a different way"*

-Shelly Davis Molock

## Televisions virtual un-reality

HUGH B. PRICE  
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Now that the fall television season — when the networks roll out their new shows with such blaring, and perhaps numbing, fanfare — is actually upon us, the public controversy that erupted last summer about the roles, or rather, the lack of roles for black actors seems to have become more muted.

Then the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People declared that a boycott of certain television networks and television advertisers might be necessary to change what seemed to be deliberately exclusionary practices in the industry.

The "noise" has subsided for the present, in part because the networks quickly reduced the glaring "whites only" tint of several of the new shows' casts by subsequently writing black and Hispanic characters into their story lines.

But the issue remains just as sharp. That issue can be summed up by this question: How could American network executives approve a lineup of new shows for the end of the 1990s that, in terms of the visibility of color and race, is virtually no different from the lineup of shows of the deeply segregated 1950s? So stunning is the lack of diversity that a July feature article in the Washington Post opened with these words — "Here's one thing you won't be seeing much of when the big TV networks roll out their new sitcoms and drama series this fall: black people." It went on to describe the new lineup as "likely to be the whitest television season in a generation."

In fact, however, as the article quickly noted, the proposed lineup actually "continues what amounts to a disappearing act for blacks and black-themed shows during the 1990s. After a decade in which Bill Cosby ruled television, and predominantly black sitcoms like "A Different World" and "the Fresh Prince of Bel Air" broke through to general audiences, African Americans are accounting for a steadily declining share of roles as broadcasters chase more numerous and affluent white viewers."

Considered in broader terms, one thing this controversy starkly underscores is how much the issue of race and color remains at the very center of the discourse about American life.

Some keep urging Americans to wrap themselves in an obscuring fog of color blindness, to pretend that in present-day America, race and color have no meaning and need never be discussed.

Yet, everywhere we turn, we see that it does — even when

we turn to what's often described as a world of fantasy. In fact, television dramas and situation comedy shows are both a world of fantasy and a world that mirrors American society — however distorted, like the view one gets from a fun-house mirror, the reflection might be. Thus, it is important to note, as the "Business and Race" column of the Wall Street Journal did this week, that "minorities have a sizable, but grossly uneven presence on television. They are over-represented in TV dramas, as compared with their population share. Yet with the exception of some all-black comedies, they are virtually shut out of sitcoms, which are the heart and soul of popular television."

The result had been that such sitcoms as "Seinfeld" and "Friends," though set in the center of the world's most diverse city, depict a Manhattan in which not only do the main characters seem to have no co-workers, good friends, or even acquaintances who are people of color. New York City itself seems virtually an all-white enclave. Some who criticized the NAACP's call for action have asserted that the over-representation of actors of color in television dramas proves television has no race or color problem. (Hispanic, Asian, and Native American actors fare even less well than blacks in getting parts on television shows, and several Hispanic, Asian and Native American groups have joined the NAACP's efforts.) But that assertion is like claiming that because blacks are over-represented as professional football and basketball players, compared with their proportion of the population, we shouldn't worry about corporate America, or higher education.

And it is revealing that when the networks responded to the NAACP's Criticism, and added nearly a score of black and Hispanic characters to some new and returning shows, the additions were made mostly in dramas.

If characters who are people of color are not present in the shows which represent the heart and soul of popular television, it means actors of color are being confined to a ghetto. And it means that the American experience such characters "represent" is being whitewashed. It's hard to believe that the creative talent in television can't figure out how to take note that both the real and the "made-up" lives of American of color have elements of comedy that are universally appealing.

If they can't, that just underscores that other point NAACP made: that there need to be more people of color in creative and executive positions at these networks. That will help ensure that the virtual reality and un-reality of television can creatively reflect the real reality of the world we live in.



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