

Yes, I am in pain: An Opinion Piece

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“Life will simply be harder.” My mother, my grandmothers, my aunts, and several other Black women who have played instrumental roles in my life have shared this sentiment with me. The notion that Black women must persist despite pain and struggle is not unfamiliar to me and many other Black women alike. However, just because this sentiment is common does not mean it should be accepted.

I have a vivid memory of my college roommate and I discussing our perception of pain. While studying for our third chemistry exam, we shared that it was that point in the semester where we were both barely holding on and keeping our heads above water. We let out deep groans that reverberated in our small room, and though it was only two long sounds, much was understood. We shared the sentiment that we were tired from studying, trying, and feeling like trying only resulted in failing. She also casually revealed that she was experiencing pain from her period, to which I offered her some ibuprofen sitting on my desk. She politely declined and said she would rest after finishing studying. I reassured her that I had plenty and that she could take some if needed. She declined again, and I pointed out that this bottle had barely been touched the entire year, and it was the middle of November. Between the both of us, there had been plenty of opportunities for it to have been used between our menstrual cycles, headaches, hangovers, and the occasional aches and pains, yet the bottle had barely been touched. We both realized that we had not considered our pain important enough to be treated, and though we could take solace in this shared experience, this neglect was not normal.

Dr. Shawn Arango Ricks characterizes Black women’s perspective of trauma as normalized chaos that prevents their ability to heal. She defines normalized chaos as “a defense mechanism used by Black women to minimize daily hassles and life situations viewing them as a part of “normal life.” This concept is used to understand how the strong black women stereotype is perpetuated and why Black women tend to neglect how they are feeling physically and mentally. Black women normalize the pain that they are experiencing and have internalized the notion that they need to prevail despite it.

Initially, I thought that maybe Black women were not expressing their pain because of this phenomenon. However, I was mistaken. Black women are extremely vocal about their pain, according to a 2022 study done by the Pew Research Center. Over 70% of Black women, young and old, have reported experiencing medical professionals neglecting their pain concerns. When it comes to expressing the pain that they are physically experiencing, Black women are assumed to be exaggerating or seen as demanding. In some cases, we are also assumed to be more prone to deviant behaviors (i.e., sex and drugs) that would contribute to whatever ailments they are experiencing. Black women have also been vocal about their mental

health, but it has been misunderstood or misinterpreted by professionals. An article released by New York University reports that Black women experiencing depression are more prone to express symptoms of insomnia, fatigue, and feelings of self-despair rather than explicitly stating that they have depression or anxiety.

Though Black women are very clearly speaking up, institutional structures have normalized the idea that our pain should not be taken seriously. This practice informs us that the institutions built to take care of us will enact more harm. The cyclical nature of racism and its effects are apparent again as Black women continue to go through the process of vocalizing their pain, having it dismissed, and enduring it until it becomes an emergent issue. This cycle further perpetuates the notion of normalized chaos and contributes to toxic stress that erodes the physical body and psychological well-being of the Black female.

Pain is not normal, and life should not be harder for Black women simply because of our race and gender! We deserve access to the same care and spaces that allow our pain to be acknowledged and accepted. Action must continue to be taken to address this issue until these safe spaces are created within these institutions and our lives.

Citations

Ricks, Shawn Arango. "Normalized chaos: Black feminism, womanism, and the (re) definition of trauma and healing." *Meridians* 16.2 (2018): 343-350.

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