

Parenting a Child with Mental Illness Part 2

7/28/2020

Sarah here. Last week (in *Parenting a Child with Mental Illness*), Lisa noted some of the unique challenges that come with parenting children with chronic mental health issues. Going along with what she said, it can be both exhausting *and* rewarding to have a child with ongoing emotional/behavioral difficulties. Parenting children with mental illness is definitely a marathon- not a sprint. In *72 Hour Hold*, Bebe Moore Campbell wrote about what that marathon was like. This fictional book was based on Campbell's real-life experiences parenting a child with Bipolar Disorder. At times heartbreaking, the book highlights the intersection of mental illness, treatment, disability, stigma, race and relationships. It delves into what it's like to love, parent and advocate for a child with mental illness throughout the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

In *72 Hour Hold*, a mother struggles to get her 18-year-old daughter the mental health treatment she needs. Bebe Moore Campbell was an accomplished author, journalist and tireless mental health advocate. She co-founded a Los Angeles chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), assembled a National Minority Mental Health Taskforce and engaged in outreach to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health in communities of color, particularly among African Americans.



Instead of struggling privately and falling victim to the stigma associated with mental illness, Bebe Moore Campbell shared how difficult it was to *get and keep* her daughter engaged in mental health care. I'm *blown away* by how brave Campbell was to open up about the concern,

distress, uncertainty, frustration and desperation that she felt as a parent in such a stressful, vulnerable situation. Rather than feeling helpless, she shared her story and normalized the difficulties of parenting a child with mental illness. She put to words the very real, difficult to acknowledge things that parents in this situation may think but not want to say aloud.

To this end, in *72 Hour Hold*, Campbell noted, “A child’s death isn’t always necessary for a mother to grieve.” As Lisa noted in last week’s blog, it’s natural for parents to dream about who their kids will be, what they’ll be like, what they’ll do together and so on. The grief that Campbell described wasn’t about looking down on her child- it didn’t mean she didn’t love her daughter, or that she wanted a different child. It also wasn’t about throwing a pity party for herself as a parent. It was about mourning the loss of what might have been. Acknowledging and grieving these private losses helped Campbell accept the child she actually had.

But this week’s blog wasn’t entitled *Sarah’s Ode to Bebe Moore Campbell*, so...why am I going on so much about her? Well, this is July. While Campbell tragically died from brain cancer in 2006, her legacy persevered and in 2008, the US House of Representatives declared that July was Bebe Moore Campbell National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month to honor her vision, advocacy and outreach efforts. This year, there has been an informal push to rebrand the month as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) Mental Health Month. While I understand the reasons behind this rebranding, including increasing inclusiveness and not using the term “minority,” I think it’s important to remember Bebe Moore Campbell this month.

Each week, Lisa and I talk with parents about their insecurities and perceived failures. Parents routinely experience a tremendous amount of doubt and guilt over small day-to-day issues that come up. As parents, it’s important to be kind to ourselves- to recognize that we’re human and to treat ourselves with compassion. Parenting any child is not easy. Parenting a child with mental illness can be an incredible challenge. Campbell used her experience, insights, talents and skills to decrease the stigma around mental health issues in communities of color. We may not make big changes in the world like she did, but we can each use our experiences, adversity and voices to help each other and make changes in our communities.