

## Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Addressing the damaging impact of digital media on BIPOC youth 01GEJ1ENP1ECJRAVQEJC3CCJG5

SPEAKER: Since the start of the pandemic, the mental health of young people has been a major point of discussion for parents, teachers, and elected officials. They're worried about isolation and all that time that young folks are spending on screens. Dr. Brendesha Tynes is a former teacher who studies the toll the digital media takes on young people of color especially.

She was in town last week to give a lecture at the annual Nobel Conference. She talked with MPR reporter Cat Richert about the online lives of black adolescents and the less talked about ways it relates to mental health.

**CATHERINE** Thank you for joining us today, Dr. Tynes.

**RICHERT:**

**BRENDESHA** Thank you for having me. This is wonderful.

**TYNES:**

**CATHERINE** So first question here, what motivated you to focus on the mental health of black youth?

**RICHERT:**

**BRENDESHA** Wow, so when I started doing this work in 2001, I would go into chat rooms. And I'm trying to understand the nature of the race-related experiences that people are exposed to-- that young people are exposed to in chat rooms.

And as I'm going through the transcripts, as I'm looking at the conversations, I see a young Latina girl saying that she's having heart palpitations. And this was after about a half hour of someone spewing racist messages at her. And so I thought, I need to focus on how these messages are impacting young people's mental health. And because the experiences were mostly happening to Black and brown young people, most of my work has tended to include those two groups.

**CATHERINE** Sure. So how do the lives of Black adolescents differ from those of their white peers?

**RICHERT:**

**BRENDESHA** It's vastly different. Let's just focus on the online aspects of their lives. So 56% of Black kids say they're online almost constantly, while there are just over 30% of white youth. Once they are like interacting in these spaces, they're more likely to experience online racial discrimination.

They're likely to experience these-- what we call traumatic events online and essentially police racial violence, police detainment, beatings, and killings of unarmed Black people. And so Black kids are having to see the death of people who look like them, a person who could be their uncle, a person who could be their cousin or their sister being killed or beaten every day.

A recent study that we did that I presented at the Nobel Conference shows that they have these experiences almost 1 and 1/2 times per day. And so that's important. Then also on top of that, they might experience algorithmic bias that includes like doing a search and getting biased search results, or we also include beauty filters that make people look more European when they apply them.

And so we found that these experiences that I mentioned are associated with anxiety and depression. And that's except the traumatic events online, which are only associated with anxiety. And we found that to be fairly interesting.

**CATHERINE RICHERT:** Yeah, talk to me a little bit more about how that might play itself out in their day-to-day lives. And are they able to seek help or are they seeking help for depression and anxiety stemming from some of this online victimization?

**BRENDESHA TYNES:** So that's been a major concern when we talk about equity and mental health because the access is still-- we need to expand it, essentially. And so even before the pandemic, we had problems with people not having access to qualified mental health professionals who are culturally competent antiracists.

And so when you would see a mental health professional, they aren't able to help them. They could actually cause harm during the sessions. And so a lot of times people just are not interested in seeing mental health professionals.

**CATHERINE RICHERT:** Yeah, so it sounds like the system is not necessarily set up to help kids who are struggling through this. So Dr. Tynes, tell me about your theory of Black Thriving.

**BRENDESHA TYNES:** Oh, wow, thanks for asking about that. So it's not published yet. But we are using Afrofuturism, as well as African-American psychology, developmental psychology, education theories to help us think about what Black survival would look like across school, community, online, and work contexts.

And we basically describe some of the conditions that would need to be in place. And first, we think that we have to center the experiences of Black kids and think deeply about the strengths that they have. The fact that they come to school with this spiritual force and their ancestors wielded this spiritual force, it sort of keeps them going from day-to-day.

Despite having consistent threats, despite being demeaned in school settings, despite all of the major challenges that are put in their way, they're still able to get up in the morning, still able to be excited about school and excited about life and just thrive in their community settings in most cases.

And so we think if we could ensure that everybody who is working with Black children actually has the training that they need to support them right, they have an understanding of their history and understanding of their culture, they have an understanding of their development, and they're able to love them-- when they feel loved, they're better able to get what you are trying to give them, like learn what you're trying to teach. And in mental health settings, get the care that you're trying to give them when you have the training to be able to provide that care.

**CATHERINE RICHERT:** Yeah. So Dr. Tynes, what safeguards or changes are needed to ensure young people of color can lead safe and thriving online lives?

**BRENDESHA TYNES:** So there are actually a host of safeguards. One, the fact that we don't have people who are qualified to serve them in schools and communities. The spaces that they're interacting in online, the policies that are in place essentially aren't protecting them from the experiences that we mentioned.

And so we need more people who are working at these tech companies to be able to understand Black children's histories, cultures, and development. We need more people of color, more black folks at the table who are able to create the algorithms that essentially inform the experiences that Black people have online.

**CATHERINE RICHERT:** Yeah, the system needs to look like the people that are serving and understand where the people they're serving are coming from, it sounds like.

**BRENDESHA TYNES:** Absolutely. We should be thinking about mental health, not as an individual problem but as a problem with communities and also that it's actually a social justice issue. And I also try to make the case that we need to center the experiences of Black youth in any discussion of equity. That's the only way we'll be able to reach equity, especially for Black youth. Absolutely.

CATHERINE RICHERT: That was Dr. Brendesha Tynes. She studies the toll digital media takes on young people of color. Thank you for being with us.

**BRENDESHA TYNES:** Thank you.

**SPEAKER:** And thank you Cat Richert for that conversation.