

TALK DEPRESSION

Feeling blue isn't taboo

Our prejudiced, medieval attitude to the depressed is shocking, writes **Sarah Britten**

REMEMBER when it was perfectly okay to make racist comments in public? Or you could boast about driving home drunk and the oaks would slap you on the back and laugh? Or talk openly about "moffies"?

We don't do these things anymore because society has moved on — or at least, what we agree is acceptable in public discussion.

Oh, many of us still tell those jokes around the braai, but we keep it under the radar because we fear the judgment of others. So if our public culture doesn't tolerate racism, or sexism, or homophobia, how come it is okay to express prejudice against the suicidal? When it comes to depression, why are South Africans mired in the middle ages?

DJ Fresh inadvertently brought the issue into the open last week with a tweet in which he asked his 143 867 fans for advice on what he should do about his niece.

DJ Fresh got massive support for making light of a suicidal relative

"Attention-seeking person I know says 'I just tried to kill myself'... would it be 'wrong' to send

them five ways that WILL work?" he tweeted.

The details of the original debate are less interesting than the discussion that went on around it. News24's comments section has always represented the fetid underbelly of middle-class South Africa, but even by their standards the comments on the tweets were breathtakingly callous.

"I am totally with Fresh. If you want to kill yourself, go for it," was one example. "I encourage suicidal people. I think it is a way to rid humanity of genetically inferior individuals," went another.

I wasn't surprised by the viciousness. What's really interesting is how few journalists and media personalities who hang around Twitter saw anything wrong with the suicide tweets.

Compare this to the Durex debacle of the week before, when the twitterati hammered the condom brand for tweeting sexist jokes. Evidently, sexism is a sexier cause than suicide.

And it shouldn't be because



DON'T BE ASHAMED: The festive season amplifies the loneliness and alienation many people feel

Picture: DANIEL BORN

suicide is a serious public health problem.

I am sorry to be such a downer at a time when all you want to do is crowd into the malls to commune with your fellow Christmas shopping zombies, but the festive season is an especially bad time of the year for suicides. The holiday madness only amplifies the loneliness and alienation many South Africans already feel.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group has provided me with a mountain of statistics and heartbreaking personal stories, many of them from teens who don't know where to turn. Twenty-three people in South Africa commit suicide every day.

For every completed suicide there are 10 attempts. Eighty five percent of people who kill them-

selves tell somebody before they do it. The group receives 400 calls a day from people desperate to talk to somebody who won't tell them they're just looking for attention.

Not all suicides are linked to depression, but most of them are — and depression affects everybody,

'Depression affects everybody, young and old, rich and poor'

young and old, rich and poor.

The burnt-out executive; the grandmother battling to care for grandchildren orphaned by Aids; the teen who barely passed matric and will never find a job.

More than 10 years ago, the University of Cape Town's Institute of

Strategic Marketing predicted that depression would be South Africa's number one public health problem by 2020.

A clinically depressed person has no more choice about their disease than a diabetic or an epileptic. Yet they are told to snap out of it, that everyone feels down from time to time, that they just feel sorry for themselves.

Clearly, depression has an image problem. Other diseases have fun runs and colour-coded ribbons and gala events, but it is open season on the depressed. The situation has improved recently, with soap stars and singers appearing on the covers of magazines and coming out of the depression closet — but the latter is still crowded with people too ashamed or afraid to tell anyone about how they feel.

To be depressed feels like being a member of a despised minority marooned in a sea of callous indifference. It all adds up: what friends think, what you hear on the radio, what celebrities say. For some, it becomes too much. But we will chip away at the stigma. We have to reach a point where making a tasteless public comment about helping someone to kill themselves is as unacceptable as boasting about driving drunk.

This is to those of you who have ever been told to snap out of it, that you're a selfish coward, you're just looking for attention and why don't you just do it. It might feel that way, but you are not alone.

● If you need help, call the South African Depression and Anxiety Group on 0800-21-22-23 or 0800-567-567, from 8am to 8pm, 365 days a year