

What the Family of Former Miss USA Cheslie Kryst Wants Us To Know About High-Functioning Depression

The beauty queen's January death by suicide was shocking because it seemed like she had it all. Many people who are suffering from depression have similar stories.

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The news that Cheslie Kryst died by suicide in early January was startling. She seemed to have it all, multiple degrees and a title as Miss USA. But recently, her mother, April Simpkins, joined the Jada Pinkett Smith, Willow Smith, and Adrienne Banfield Norris on Red Table Talk for a public interview, making it clear that looks can be deceiving for people with high-functioning depression.

Simpkins started saying it was evident that Cheslie was gifted with a passion for advocating for others at an early age. Her mother also says she doesn't know if she'll "get over the grief." As she navigates what she believes will be a life-long relationship with grief, she noted the signs that Cheslie was struggling were visible early on. Her daughter was struggling in her early 20s, though she didn't know the severity.

"I did know Cheslie was suffering from depression. I didn't know the severity of it," she told them. "This was not her

first suicide attempt—she had attempted suicide before, and it was after that first attempt that she and I were very close.” Simpkins continued, saying she encouraged her daughter to always call her in crisis. Cheslie did all the “right things” to take care of her mental health, like seeing a mental health professional and getting a good night’s sleep. But she rarely showed the outside world how much she was struggling.

“Cheslie had the ability to deflect,” Simpkins said. “If you said to Cheslie, ‘Cheslie, how are you doing?’ she would say, ‘I’m fine, how are you doing?’...and I think for so many, that’s why they feel like they were best friends with Cheslie because she was so intent on talking about them, not her.”

Mercedes Samudio, licensed psychotherapist and author of *Shame-Proof Parenting*, says people with high-functioning depression—which is officially called persistent depressive disorder or dysthymia—look like they have it all together, but they don’t.

“They’re always in this space of depression, but they’re not necessarily having really low lows. They always seem like they’re just managing things as best as they can.” She says this makes it easy to miss. “A really good sign of high-functioning depression can be people living their life, but you noticed that amongst all the things they’re doing, they still feel like they’re unmotivated,” she says. “They might also have a lack of energy and fatigue or lower self-esteem.”

Other common symptoms are changes in sleep habits or appetite, difficulty concentrating and making decisions, or feelings of hopelessness.

Simpkins recalls the insecurity her daughter had around aging and the internet trolls who flooded her with mean comments after she wrote the piece, “A Pageant Queen Reflects on Turning 30,” in *Allure* magazine. She speaks of knowing that despite all the accomplishments, the voices in Kryst’s head

told her she wasn't good enough. This was most painfully clear the morning she received the text message right before her passing.

"Wish I could stay with you, but I cannot bear the crushing weight of persistent sadness, hopelessness, and loneliness any longer," wrote Kryst. "I've never told you these feelings because I've never wanted you to worry and because I hoped they would eventually change. But I know they never will. I've wished for death for years, and I know you would want to know and want to help, but I haven't wanted to share this way with anyone."

Simpkins and the Red Table cast held it together as they described Kryst's love and gratitude for her mother, the impact that battling depression and loneliness has had on her friendships, and her hope that she'll find rest in heaven.

Samudio says it's important for people to understand persistent depressive disorder and other forms of depression present differently in different people. She says when people think of high-functioning depression they think of someone who's always talking about suicide or self-harm or sleeps a lot—that's not necessarily true.

She says those who suspect a loved one is dealing with high-functioning depression should let them know that they are there to support them and their worth isn't tied to their accomplishments. But not to hold themselves responsible.

"Help them understand that their worth isn't [based on] how they feel," she says.

During the Red Table Talk interview, Simpkins says that seeking grief support as a family has been invaluable.

Simpkins notes her daughter's smile was infectious, "but it didn't remove the depression," and hopes that by sharing Kryst's story—a request she expressed in her final wishes—that

others will be more kind. “I do hope that opening up these discussions and just talking about where Cheslie was—her state of mind at that time—hopefully encourages people to be kinder.”

(Source: Parents.com_