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TV portrayals bad for black women

By Melody T. McCloud

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Even before Donald Trump's 2011 season of "Celebrity Apprentice" began, the chosen previews featured NeNe Leakes of "Real Housewives of Atlanta" raising Hades with everyone, especially the other black women on the show. I'd bet "The Donald" loves this — black girls "gone wild"— as it is good for ratings and for those who like such acerbic behavior. But I say, enough already.

Does such wild, crass, abrasive behavior happen on other "reality" shows? Yes. But contrary to what many say, the field, and perceptions, is not always level, nor will it ever be.

As a black woman who is trying to promote positive images of black women in the media, I say we really don't need this from NeNe, Star Jones, Dionne Warwick, Omarosa, hip-hop artists, popular burlesque-styled vocalists or anyone else. I am sick of seeing black women gratuitously sparring with each other, for no good reason and in front of the world.

We also don't need the media to only give visibility to such types. Not all black women act as we too often see on TV; and Oprah Winfrey is not the only appearing-to-be "good" black woman in America. Millions of black women are cherished wives, proud mothers (of high-achieving, articulate, intelligent, noncriminal children), corporate heads and successful entrepreneurs. They comb their hair, know how to dress and speak the Queen's English. They are not loud, crass or unkempt; they are polished, sophisticated, loving and kind women.

Why can't the media feature those black women? Even black TV and movie producers (think Tyler Perry) often portray black women in a negative light. Why? When is the open season on women of color going to stop; and why do some women allow themselves to be portrayed in such a manner?

Some say the negative imagery is no big deal and doesn't affect them in a personal way, but many see a bigger picture. Many people — especially men — are visual creatures. If black women are rarely or never portrayed as beautiful, sexy, neat, classy, appealing, loving and desirable, how are they ever going to be perceived as such? Are these images innocent and superficial or does it go deeper?

Public health officials mostly point to "lack of access to health services" and "lack of insurance" as reasons why many minorities fare so poorly with health care outcomes. That is true. But since outcomes for black women who have insurance and access to care are mostly the same as for those who don't, I feel there is another component that needs to be recognized, namely, the impact of social rejection and other psycho-social factors affecting black women's health. What physical stress (and increase in stress

hormones) do black women experience when their psyche is constantly barraged with negative images and misrepresentations?

As I lecture across the country, I often hear women speak of their frustration, anger and pain about the barrage of negative imagery that is not balanced by an equal number of positive images. It pains their spirits; and physically, as documented by functional MRI scans, the brain responds to rejection and social pain in the same way it responds to physical pain.

I called out Pepsi for their Super Bowl ad disparaging the image of black women; I'm likewise calling out these "sisters" who conduct themselves in such a debasing, disrespectful and unbecoming manner.

To black women behaving badly for the sake of fame, I say stop it. Think past the Benjamins going into your bank account and about how you look and sound. For one minute, for the benefit of a people, think about what image you are putting forth to young people and to the world. Because of your platform, you can affect the perception and psyche of millions. Will you use that platform for evil, or use it for good?

The media shapes all of us in ways we don't even discern; I hope it will take steps to mitigate the negative images it puts forth. I also wish those who have that national exposure would seek to present a more positive view of their character. Exhibit grace, or disgrace? Make the right choice. All the more, it is up to parents to be the true role models their children need.

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