

Jenifer Lewis

Q & A



Jenifer Lewis, is an actress, author, activist and Pacific Clinics' 2019 Champion of Mental Health. Currently appearing as Ruby Johnson on ABC's hit TV show *Black-ish*, Jenifer has maintained a successful and legendary career across television, music and theater. She has appeared in nearly 500 television episodes, 68 movies and four Broadway shows.

Meeting at her beautiful Sherman Oaks home, Jenifer and Myeisha Peguero Gamiño, MA, vice president of public affairs and advocacy, talk about overcoming a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, her award-winning book *The Mother of Black Hollywood: A Memoir* and her commitment to helping others by sharing her courageous story.

What prompted you to write this book?

It was the biggest challenge of my life to write this book. I wanted to write the book because I knew I had an amazing story, an amazing life to share. I knew by writing the book I could help people. I got everything I wanted and what else is there to do but to give it back? I have lived the spectrum, from great poverty to great success – movies, television, Broadway, and concerts all over the world – but my greatest success of all is that I'm happy. I'm happy because I have the wherewithal to give back through telling my story. I've lived a thousand lifetimes in this lifetime, and if I can do it, anyone can.

Why are you passionate about mental health?

The passion comes from wanting to help others. It took a long time before I sought help, but I did it and found happiness. So can you.

How did therapy help you?

For 33 years I woke up with mostly tears in my eyes. I finally sought therapy, but there would be therapy sessions where I would just sit there and not talk. I was too scared to bring up my childhood, or a betrayal from a man, a death of a brother. I thought if I agreed to take medication it would dim my light, but it didn't. The medication puts you in a stage where you

can listen, where you can organize your thoughts. And with the tools from talk therapy, it gave me everything I needed for a good life. My therapist held the torch for me - the light at the end of the tunnel. But first, you have to want to get well. No one can do it for you. I thought my knight in shining armor was going to show up and take care of everything. Thinking your teacher, mother or uncle can save you, but that was a fairy tale. It has to come from within. The work has to be done inside of you and it starts with 'I want to be well.' I found the strength to seek help and encourage others to do the same. If you don't take care of yourself, how can you be strong for those who you love?

Why the title, *The Mother of Black Hollywood*?

I have played on-screen mothers to Whitney Houston, Tupac, Angela Bassett as Tina Turner, Gabrielle Union, Kevin Hart, and Morris Chestnut. For over 30 years, I have been cast as a mom to many actors and I love that I can continue to do what I love each day and entertain.

What have you learned from readers during book signings across the nation?

I am humbled because I learned that the book helped a lot of people. I shared my experiences and I told my truth about the molestation, the sex addiction, the bipolar disorder, the poverty and the dysfunction. It was not easy, but I did it – I shared my story. Nina Simone had power. Billie Holiday had power. Winnie Mandela had power. And when I pass from this plane, I want someone to say Jenifer Lewis had power.

There is a letter to readers at the end of the book where you explain that you wrote the book because you “owe.” What did you mean when you wrote that letter?

I walked through fires to get where I am today. I owe it to others to share this story and hope that a piece of it helps them seek help, find clarity in their own lives, or even helps them laugh. I owe because someone helped me and I want to help others.

“Because I have survived, I owe. Because I still have a smile on my face and am in good health, I owe. Because I live with bipolar disorder and thrive, I owe. Because I made it to the other side of sex addiction, I owe. Because my generation has left behind a world of chaos and environmental deterioration that the next is being made to clean up, I owe. Because while my role as the Mother of Black Hollywood started out as just that—a part to play—the platform has afforded me the opportunity to have so many young people come to me seeking answers to why, how, what, when... please, Miss Lewis? I owe. I owe it to the world to share what I have learned on my journey.”

– Excerpt from Jenifer Lewis:
The Mother of Black Hollywood

Visit www.pacificclinics.org/2019-champions-mental-health to watch Pacific Clinics’ tribute video honoring Jenifer Lewis, Champion of Mental Health. ■

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), bipolar disorder affects approximately 5.7 million Americans averaging 25 years of age. Bipolar disorder, previously referred to as manic depressive disorder, is a mental illness that causes periods of depression and high intensity mood swings. During these mood swings, an individual behaves or feels extremely happy, sad or mad. This illness differs between individuals however, it can be caused by genetics, brain structure or seasonal depression and other mental illnesses.

If you or someone you know is experiencing bouts of extreme highs or lows, depression or is suicidal please reach out to someone you trust, or seek help from a qualified mental health professional.

National Book Club Conference ‘Book of the Year’ Award Winner

“SCINTILLATING, YET HEARTFELT.” —VANITY FAIR

JENIFER LEWIS

THE MOTHER OF BLACK HOLLYWOOD

A MEMOIR



The Mother of Black Hollywood

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AudioBook narrated by Jenifer



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