

Centering

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Trauma and the African American Experience

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Does trauma present any differently with African Americans than with any other culture? A mother grieving for the loss of her son through violence, a family losing their home to a fire, young children victimized by sexual assault or physical abuse, a mid-manager downsized from a job held for 15 years - these are all traumatic events in the lives of individuals; they transcend race, class, and ethnicity. Yet, separation and loss are themes that underline trauma for African American clients.

Given their origins and process through the middle passage, African Americans historically are characterized as resilient people. Their reaction to trauma, however, is held close and reaches deep within their soul. Like so many others, it may be triggered by a minor incident or another major tragedy. The point of crisis is a direct result of the individual's inability to contain the pain. Martin and Martin (1995) write that when "helping became professionalized in the Black community," a foundation was put in place to maintain a community awareness of solidarity, identity, and survival of the group. This group modality emphasized "collective empathy, collective oneness, and collective hope." According to Martin and Martin, the expectation had been that one solved the problem alone or within the group. An unwritten rule suggested that only when those efforts are unsuccessful could you seek additional

help through the elder, witch doctor, or other outside source.

African Americans today normally seek professional assistance when they have exhausted all other means of self-support and are overwhelmed by the crisis. Pinderhuges (1973) writes that Black people have had more experience than Whites with loss, pain, and deprivation which can imprint tragedy-seeking scripts in their personalities. Martin & Martin (1995) support that position by

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recognizing that loss and separation is at the core of problems in Black life. Rocklin (1965) believes that when the problems of loss and separation are unresolved, the entrance into adulthood is accompanied "with an inability to form lasting ties of intimacy, with problems regarding task completion, phobias about success, difficulties with normal separations, living below one's full potential, psychiatric disorders, and the most serious of all, the propensity for self- or-other-destructive behavior" (p.121).

Clearly, the earlier in the therapy process that a therapist recognizes the underlying issues presented by the African American client, the sooner

he/she can provide appropriate intervention. It is particularly important in trauma work with African Americans that the clinician be patient and take time uncovering core issues and work at building a trusting relationship in which the client can feel comfortable.

Underlying issues of loss and separation may be addressed appropriately through grief work. One method of assisting clients with "mourning" is to assign specific homework tasks.

The homework may begin with the client examining all parts of loss and separation in his/her life through written assignments. The therapist can empower the client through discussion and closure of each issue using interpretation skills rather than merely attending or reflecting skills. The inclusion of family members in the process can be extremely helpful. In addition, it may be useful to ascertain the individuals' spiritual roots and encourage him/her to use the church family as a way of reconnecting and healing from the loss.

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