



History Continues to Repeat Itself...The Unending Assault on Black Life

On August 9th, 2014 Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot to death by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. His death rapidly incited outrage and civil unrest across the nation and has quickly become another example of a disturbing historical trend. In the Dred Scott decision of 1857, Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney wrote, "...a Black man has no rights a white man is bound to respect." The brutality of this incident also reminds us of the controversial case of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black male child brutally killed by Whites in the South in the 1950's. These tragedies continue to communicate to the Black community, and particularly Black male youth, that their lives are undervalued and endangered.

Beyond their historical context, the behaviors exhibited by law enforcement officers in Ferguson, and some protesters, have grave consequences for the psychological well-being of not only Black males within that community, but also Black people beyond its city and state lines. The use of excessive force by an increasingly militarized police presence in the United States and the resulting devaluation of Black lives can have deleterious effects on the Black psyche altogether. In addition, the subsequent actions of some protestors, such as looting and violence, do little to alleviate the negative psychological impact of this tragedy.

The current demonstration of hostility and force by law enforcement in Black communities has a historical legacy, particularly with Black boys and men. This tension has been found to manifest in emotional distressing responses including anxiety, irritability, anger, loss of concentration, and fatigue. These psychological injuries have been reported to lead to poor physical and behavioral health outcomes, which place Blacks at greater risk for hypertension, substance use/abuse, physical aggression, hostility, and suicide. In addition, continued exposure to such traumatic events can lead to the deterioration of stress buffering responses, overall psychological well-being, and spiritual growth. Thus, it is abundantly clear that nothing will be resolved until systemic change occurs across the nation with regard to implicit and explicit discrimination against Black youth who are routinely targeted by law enforcement- even within their own communities.

ABPsi, Where Do We Go From Here?

"Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?" is the title of a provocative book written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The question embedded in the title is a consistent reminder that communities have a choice on how they respond to the experience of collective trauma as represented by the murder of Michael Brown and the response by the law enforcement in Ferguson. The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), during these times of both chaos and community, stands ready as a partner in the healing process. Limited organizational



resources notwithstanding, the ABPsi remains committed to meeting the needs of our communities through the use of technology, training, technical assistance, and direct services where feasible. We do this as an expression of our mission: “The liberation of the African Mind, empowerment of the African Character, and enlivenment and illumination of the Spirit.”

Our role as Black psychologists is to discern and redress the systemic root causes of psychological distress, develop tools to support resiliency in the face of enduring racial micro aggressions and assaults, and address the pain of those who have been traumatized. In order to best serve Black people, we must utilize theoretical frameworks, skill sets, strategies, and tools that reflect the cultural and contextual realities of Black people. Below, are recommended approaches to restore healing and health to Ferguson and the hundreds of communities it represents.

The following recommendations and resources may help to support healing as families move from chaos to community:

- Self-care. Witnessing and experiencing traumatic events, such as those that took place in Ferguson, can be harmful to the mental, physical, and spiritual health of Blacks. Research has found that the effects of vicarious trauma, e.g. hearing about a traumatic event, can be as impactful as witnessing the actual event. Further, the impact of trauma is exacerbated with repeated exposure to the event. Therefore, it is critical for community members, as well as mental health professionals, to take intentional steps to ensure their emotional well-being.

Self-care activities can be helpful in promoting both physical and mental health. First, we encourage individuals to limit exposure to the stressor e.g., in the case of the Ferguson tragedy, one may need to limit exposure to media coverage. Physical activities such as going for a walk, practicing yoga, exercising, and dancing may be helpful as well. Engaging in spiritually replenishing practices such as meditating or praying may assist in healing. As we are a communal people, we suggest spending time with others, and seeking support and counsel from pastors, friends, and mental health professionals. For those who are in need of mental health assistance, please visit the ABPsi directory of psychologists located on the national website.

- Community Healing Through the Social Action. Becoming an agent of change by participating in community organizing and social justice activities can be an antidote for the harmful effects of racial oppression such as the murders of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Ezell Ford in Los Angeles, Eric Garner in New York, Trayvon Martin in Sanford, to name a few. This community action is necessary for psychological protection



and it is necessary to ensure Black people have access to the same social, economic, and human rights as other members of American society. Gaining a critical consciousness or awareness of multiple generations of unjust treatment, institutional racism, and tactics such as victim blaming, opens the door for psychological liberation gained through a deeper understanding of the process of oppression and the state of psychological, social, economic, and political oppression. We encourage our members to affiliate with local ABPsi chapters to engage in social justice activities within their local communities.

- Community Healing Through the Emotional Emancipation Circles. While social action is important, psychological and emotional healing from 400 plus years of denigration and injustice is essential. We have been trying to fight racism without attacking one of its key foundations: the lie of Black inferiority. The enslavement and colonization of Black people ended more than a century ago. Numerous laws aimed at promoting racial equality have been passed. However, the lie of Black inferiority, devised 400 years ago to justify the enslavement, colonization, and subjugation of Black people, has remained unchallenged, and it is still very prevalent among our people. Four centuries of powerful negative stereotypes based on that lie have shaped perceptions of Black people as being less than human. The lie is at the root of the fear, disrespect, hostility, and discrimination too often directed at Blacks. It contributes to the Black-White health and academic achievement gaps, to the criminalization and mass incarceration of Black people, and to the presumption that Black defendants and victims are often guilty. It promotes the dehumanization of Black people and the devaluation of Black lives. It is also at the root of our devaluation of ourselves, and it is the source of historical and continuing emotional trauma in the Black community.

Emotional Emancipation Circles (EECs) are spaces in which we as Black people can come together to: 1) share our stories, 2) deepen our understanding of the impact of our history on our emotions and relationships, and 3) learn and practice essential emotional wellness skills. In emotional emancipation circles, we can open our paths for liberation from oppressive societal conditions, myths, and lies and do the work of community building to create the just society to which we are entitled. For additional information on the EECs, please visit: <http://communityhealingnet.com/2012/03/contribute-to-the-emotional-emancipation-circles-movement-now/>

- Strategies for Schools. Exposure to traumatic events can cause a level of emotional distress that can result in anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability, hopelessness, and anger for some children and youth. These are all legitimate responses to what we have seen in Ferguson. As such, we recommend that communities and schools find ways to assist



children in articulating and exploring what they are witnessing and feeling as a result of watching media coverage and/or living within the Ferguson community. Schools and communities should be cognizant that though the Ferguson tragedy is no longer dominating print and televised media, the effects of the trauma may still be salient in the hearts and minds of the children exposed to the events in Ferguson. We recommend that schools create safe spaces staffed with professional helpers to allow students and staff the opportunity to share their experiences and emotions regarding what they witnessed. We also recommend that school personnel pay particular attention to the potential lingering effects of trauma that may be manifested in children's attitudes and behaviors within the school climate. The Sanctuary model provides a wide range of resources for families, schools, and communities. For more information on the Sanctuary Model, visit the following: <http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/schools.php>

The healing of Black people is a process that has witnessed no signs of abatement. The cameras are gone, but the work of healing has barely begun. The ABPsi believes that healing from years of collective and personal trauma should be a public health priority in order for Black people to fully realize the importance and value of their spiritual, psychological, physical health, and wellness.

This commentary was authored by the following members of the ABPsi General Assembly Public Policy Committee:

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