

Dr. King, the Psychological Freedom Fighter

By Taasogle Daryl Rowe, Ph.D. and Enola G. Aird, Esq.

Our Take: It is well past time for Black people to heed Dr. King's call to build a movement for emotional emancipation.

There is a sad irony in the fact that we are celebrating the 85th birthday of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., just a month after the *New York Times* [focused](#) national attention on the gap in breast cancer survival rates between Black and White women. This news came on top of the disclosure that the income and wealth gaps between Black and White continue to grow, and the gap in standardized test scores has scarcely budged.

The King holiday has been with us now for nearly 30 years. Every year, we celebrate him as the Dreamer and the Drum Major. But the data on the disruptions within the Black community continue to add up, and they are likely to keep getting worse until we pay attention to a forgotten yet crucial part of Dr. King's legacy: his call for psychological liberation.

In August of 1967, in his final presidential [address](#) to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. King drew a powerful link between racism and the psychological health of Black people. In answer to the question "where do we go from here?," he said, "first, we must massively assert our dignity and worth." He talked about the "false sense of inferiority" that plagues the Black community, and pointed to the need for us to regain our "psychological freedom." "Any movement for the Negro's freedom," he said, "that overlooks this necessity is only waiting to be buried."

On this, as with so many other issues, Dr. King was prophetic. There is a growing body of evidence that the Black community is in emotional distress brought about by the historical and continuing trauma of racism and its dehumanizing consequences. Among the signs of distress

are: 1) homicide is the leading cause of death for young Black men; 2) a consistent decline in both the numbers and the longevity of Black marriages; and 3) the disproportionate numbers of African Americans incarcerated.

A comprehensive [study](#) by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan found that higher levels of chronic physical health problems, such as hypertension, heart disease, obesity, depression, and lower life satisfaction, are related to the chronic stress of racism. According to the American Psychiatric Association's [2006 resolution](#) against racism, "racism and racial discrimination adversely affect mental health by diminishing the victim's self-image, confidence, and optimal mental functioning." And a recent study in *Psychological Science* found that experiencing discrimination [increases anger and risk-taking behavior](#).

We believe that close to the root of many of the problems plaguing our community is the lie of Black inferiority. That lie was introduced centuries ago to justify the dehumanization and enslavement of Black people, and it is still with us today – undermining our psychological, physical, family, and community well-being. It is also undermining our ability to address our challenges. A community in emotional distress cannot deal effectively with the problems confronting it.

Community Healing Network, Inc. (CHN), and The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) are working in collaboration to build a movement for the emotional emancipation, healing, wellness, and empowerment of Black people. A key element of our collaboration is the development of the concept of Emotional Emancipation Circles, culturally grounded, evidence-based support groups through which we as a people can work together to develop essential emotional wellness skills and compassionately examine our community, family, and personal histories to decide which of our attitudes and behaviors are worth taking with us--and which

must be left behind--as we move forward to build a future in which we can thrive, not just survive.

A team from ABPsi led by immediate past president, Dr. Cheryl Tawede Grills, has developed an Emotional Emancipation (EE) Circles Guide, which has been piloted in Tuskegee, Alabama, and New Haven, Connecticut. At its 45th annual convention in New Orleans in July 2013, ABPsi trained teams of psychologists who have launched EE Circles in more than 20 cities across the African Diaspora. CHN and ABPsi will continue to work together to provide webinar trainings to local leaders to launch additional EE Circles starting in February 2014 through an initiative called *Celebrating Our History, Transforming Our Present, and Taking Control of Our Destiny*.

Our goal is to engage a critical mass of Black people in the United States in the movement for emotional emancipation by the year 2019, the 400th anniversary of the forced arrival of Africans at Jamestown colony. As a people, we know a great deal about Dr. King, the dreamer. But we need to know even more about King, the psychological freedom fighter. As Dr. King said, “nobody else can do this for us. The Negro will only be free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive manhood his own emancipation proclamation.”

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