

A Strength Based and Trauma Informed Approach to Working with the African American Community

First, it is important to note that the African American* community is not monolithic. There are vast differences in experiences, thoughts/opinions, and in the ways in which historical trauma has manifested. AND it is still important to understand some of the central themes that one may encounter when working with this community as well as the sociological context in which these themes occur. The information discussed here should *not* be used to make assumptions but instead as a cognitive template when working with the community.



Common strengths of the African American community

From an ancestral perspective, there is an innate resilience that is at the core of the African American community. This resiliency, added to many others strengths, should guide our work as helping professionals. In addition, one must understand the tremendous amount of trauma that this community has experienced — and continues to experience. It is important that practitioners educate themselves about the historical context of this trauma as well as be willing to do their own self-examination work.

*note that this author is using the term African American to refer to those who have a legacy with chattel slavery in this country

Self-Examination

It is crucial that helping professionals be willing to examine their own biases and ways in which they have been impacted by the system of white supremacy. This system permeates every aspect of this society and has helped to keep African American people disenfranchised. In order to authentically connect, one must actively reflect on their own internalized messaging and access a deeper understanding of their self.

Historical Context

Historical trauma can be defined as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, either within or over the entire course of a lifespan, and whose impact expands across generations. One of the biggest examples of historical trauma amongst an entire ethnic group is the African American experience with chattel slavery. Chattel slavery is distinguished from other systems of slavery in the sense that the person who was enslaved was looked at as less than human (written into law as 3/5ths of a person). Among other things, they were legally allowed to be beaten, traded, raped, and forced into a limitless amount of labor.

Contemporary Context

African American people continue to experience institutionalized racism, police brutality, and daily micro/macroaggressions at a disproportionate rate in comparison other ethnic groups. These experiences compound and add to an already complex form of trauma. Dr. Joy Degruy coined the term Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome to refer to the clinical impact of these intersectional experiences.

Role of Trauma and Stress

There are millions of ways that trauma and chronic stress manifest. One way is somatically — through our bodies. This could show up as

CATTA

Child Abuse Training and Technical Assistance Center
working with communities to prevent child abuse

www.cattacenter.org

health ailments or experiencing a variety of pain in one's body. Trauma may also impact how one feels about themselves and others as well as one's overall outlook on life. An example of how this often shows up is through a mistrust of the system and those that represent them. Mistrust is a natural and healthy response to trauma and can present a challenge to those attempting to engage the community in services. As a result, helping professionals are strongly encouraged to spend as much time as possible building relationships, as the strength of the relationship is often what influences the other aspects of services. ♦

Created by Taquelia Washington, LCSW, sole proprietor of EmpowerMe! Services. For more information or to book a training, visit www.empowermeservices.com



What is the psychological impact of 250 years of chattel slavery, added to the continued dehumanization that has occurred since — and continues to occur today?

Tips for Engagement with the African American Community

- Acknowledging differences can be a powerful tool.
 - White people may represent the system.
 - Other ethnic groups may be perceived as not being able to understand their experience.
- Prioritize building relationships and rapport.
- Be consistent and reliable.
- Build interventions from cultural and personal strengths.
- Keep flexibility around meeting location, if possible.
- Adopt a psycho-social model when conceptualizing.
- Use interpersonal orientations
 - Self-disclosure
 - Providing feedback
- Use positive racial socialization as an affirmation tool.
- Adopt flexible roles: adviser, advocate, facilitator of traditional healing systems (elders, church)
- Assess root of anger and understand anger as a mask emotion.
- Be committed to doing your own work.

This document was prepared for the Child Abuse Training and Technical Assistance Center (CATTa), a project of the Center for Innovation and Resources, Inc. (CIR). Funding for the CATTa project is provided by the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, Victims Services Branch (Cal OES). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position of CIR, CATTa, or Cal OES. No official endorsement of materials, resources, or referrals should be inferred.