



Black men don't do therapy: Discuss

by Leroy Harley

That was the theme of ACC's Open Forum held on 31st March 2022. Ever since I commenced my studies, I have been interested in the relative lack of black men participating in counselling courses. Since beginning to practice myself, I am now similarly intrigued by the lack of black men who choose to see a counsellor. My aim nowadays is to rectify that lack by encouraging black men into counselling, on both sides of the couch.

HOLDING BACK BECAUSE YOU'RE BLACK

My personal experience leads me to think that black men shy away from therapy for several reasons. I suggest these are:

- They don't tend to see anybody like them on either side of the couch.
- There is something of a social stigma within the

black community regarding counselling/therapy.

- On counselling courses, race typically does not seem to be taken into consideration in any meaningful way.
- Black men are taught to be strong, and are expected to be strong.
- In some instances, black men simply do not know where to go for help.
- There remains a feeling of not belonging in this country, as a black man.

On a course I attended, for example, some of my white colleagues said they should not be the ones to raise the topic of the scarcity of black men in counselling as it was not affecting them. Whilst this reluctance might not represent the majority of white counsellors, it does, nevertheless, represent a sad attitude wherever

it might be found. If any such attitude is ever present in the actual counselling room, then it stands to reason that counsellors are patently not dealing with the whole person.

Likewise, we spoke about the power dynamics that are sometimes in place in a counselling room. The added power play that can arise is of a white person who is perceived to have all the power and a black person who is seen/perceived as 'less than'. These unfortunate power dynamics need to be talked about, whenever they occur in counselling rooms and in training courses.

LET ME TELL YOU LEROY'S STORY . . .

When, as a young boy, I was abused, I literally had no idea where to go for help. Consequently, I held on to my pain for about 30 years, and when I

eventually told someone about the abuse, I confided in a white man. It was not the best experience as he did not understand me or my culture. I felt there was a lack of cultural connection, hence my disappointment. I then held on to the pain for another few years, partly because my story was so embarrassing that I felt it would be easier to keep it to myself. Unfortunately, doing so resulted in a lot of internal emotional pain. It was for this reason that I got into counselling.

I felt I had to become the change I wanted to see. Most counsellors are white women, so finding a black man to help another black man was near impossible. Furthermore, as a black man conditioned by my culture not to show weakness, I felt the weight of the expectation that I should simply take my experience on the chin and move on. Sadly, though, moving on is not easy. I didn't know what to do with my pent-up pain and anger. This intensified the feeling of not belonging, in that even my emotional responses are differently conditioned and expressed, compared to those with whom I share much of my life and time. (Negative portrayals of black men on television, for example, have done little, historically, to

alleviate this stereotype.)

REFLECTING ON RACISM

Hosting the ACC Open Forum was a good and safe experience. Those in attendance wanted to learn and shared their experiences, which further enhanced the discussion. There was a particular discussion with regards to racism; namely the definition of racism. Sadly, we did not have the time to fully engage with that topic. We will, however, be having a forum to discuss what racism means to people. This is important because some people believe that all people can be racist whereas some don't accept that generalisation. My sense is we will need a lot longer than an hour and a half for that particular dialogue!

The atmosphere during the discussion was such that people felt at ease raising questions they had been holding onto for some time. Those in attendance were willing to share their experiences and learn from each other. I think since the murder of George Floyd it has become easier to talk about race, which is a good thing, and I am therefore hoping this is not the end of the interaction and that people take away lessons from the forum that they can use in their everyday lives, and, most importantly, perhaps, in the

counselling room. I would like to see race better represented on counselling courses.

Leroy Harley wrote this reflection on behalf of Ethnic Tapestry (ACCeNT)

ACCeNT was formed in July 2020 as a response to the murder of George Floyd. We are a group of counsellors and pastoral care practitioners who wanted to make a difference to the Association of Christian Counsellors (ACC) and the wider community. It is our passion to see progressive change regarding diversity and inclusion to address racism. If ACCeNT can contribute to that lasting change in the world of counselling and beyond then efforts will not be in vain, and our objectives will be achieved. We are a group of people dedicated to ensuring that our voice is heard at the table, and that God is glorified.

If you would like to learn more about or join ACCeNT please contact us via email at: accent@acc-uk.org



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