

# Healing the Hidden Wounds of Racial Trauma

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A disproportionate number of children and youth of color fail in school and become trapped in the pipelines of treatment, social service, and justice systems. This article examines racial trauma and highlights strategies for healing and transformation.

All service systems for youth encounter young people of color who can be challenging to treat, reach, and teach. Our difficulty in meeting their needs is not just because of greater “pathology” or “resistance” as some assert. Rather, we fail to appreciate the ways in which race is entangled with their suffering.



## **Race-Related Trauma Wounds**

Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche. Without a clear and descriptive language to describe this experience, those who suffer cannot coherently convey their pain, let alone heal. The source of their hurt is often confused with distracting secondary symptoms ranging from hopelessness to acting out behavior. Racial oppression is seldom seen as contributing to these difficulties, and discussions of race are dismissed as manufacturing excuses, justifying bad behavior. As with other forms of trauma, we ask the wrong question about struggling youth of color. Instead of asking “What is wrong with them?” we need to ask the trauma-informed question, “What has happened to them?”

Rarely is unmasking and treating the hidden wounds of racial trauma a focal point of intervention. Instead, conventional approaches attend to family problems, individual psychological issues, behavioral problems, affect disorders, and substance misuse (Hardy & Qureshi, 2012). These are salient factors but skirt issues of race which are powerful dynamics in the lives of youth of color. These are insidious, mostly invisible, and virtually inextricable from the other difficulties that youth are experiencing. To work effectively with youth of color, we must understand, address, and ultimately heal the hidden wounds of racial oppression.

## **Internalized Devaluation**

A toxic human mold, hard to see yet ever spreading, gnaws at the dignity of youth of color. They are oblivious to this infection but emotionally reactive to its effects (Hardy & Qureshi, 2012). *Internalized devaluation* is a direct by-product of racism, inextricably linked to the deification of whiteness and the demonization of non-white hues. It is perpetrated throughout society, including in the very systems with the stated mission of serving youth. For example, when youth of color are removed from their families and placed in a residential setting, they observe that most of their peers in care look like them. This reinforces a powerful message internalized since childhood—“I am bad and unworthy.” Racial devaluation is intertwined with other affronts to dignity such as neglect, abuse, and rejection. While

treatment protocols may be designed to address familial dynamics, scant or no attention is given to underlying racial wounds.

Profoundly devalued youth become hypervigilant about gaining respect (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005). They intuitively understand that respect is the perfect elixir for devaluation. While they would be hard-pressed to explain why respect is so important, they seem to *know* experientially that respect reduces the intensity of the uneasiness of devaluation. To some of these youth, death is preferable to disrespect.

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## **Assaulted Sense of Self**

There is a second hidden trauma wound that is closely tied to internalized devaluation and ultimately racial oppression. The *assaulted sense of self* is the culmination of recurring experiences with internalized devaluation. Continual exposure to devaluation shapes how youth of color see themselves. It becomes very challenging to develop a healthy sense of self when one’s emotional-psychological milieu is inundated with the repeated race-related messages such as: *you are not as attractive as...not as smart as... too dumb to...not intelligent enough to... ain’t ever going to be anything...not college material...not welcomed here...and so forth*. The onslaught of devaluing messages makes it hard for youth to know who they really are—and easy to believe they are what others say. This is the essence of the assaulted sense of self. Unfortunately, it strikes at one of the most vulnerable stages of the life cycle: adolescence, when youth are forming their identities.

## **Internalized Voicelessness**

The third hidden wound of *internalized voicelessness* erodes the ability to defend against a barrage of unwelcomed and unjustified negative, debilitating messages. While these wounds are described here in a linear and distinct fashion, they are experienced in a systemic, inter-tangled way. For example, voicelessness both results from and fuels internalized devaluation and an assaulted sense of self. While voicelessness does not literally render the youth silent, it impairs the ability to advocate for oneself. Angel, a seventeen-year-old Latino, shared this example with his therapist:

“Dog, it’s crazy out there as a Latino...; everybody looks at you all the time like something is getting ready to go down. I mean, I get on the E Train (subway) and suddenly all eyes are on you like you are a thief, rapist, or burglar. I see the looks.... I know the looks cuz they happen all the time. At times, I want to go over to them, you know, mostly white people, and say ‘hey, I know what you’re thinking and I ain’t no robber’. But I ain’t stupid. I know I can’t say s--- cuz the minute I try to say something like that, the next thing you know, the person start screaming and yelling, I am dead! You and I know what happens next...here comes the Po-Po and the next thing you know I’m on lock down for just trying to tell some racist M----- F-----, I ain’t trying to rob them. Man, it’s messed up out there!”

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Angel never mentions the word *voicelessness* but his experience on the subway describes it perfectly. He is both a victim and a prisoner of others’ perceptions of him. His options are severely limited, especially his ability to advocate for himself. From his perspective, he either speaks up and risks appearing to be threatening or remains silent and has his sense of self further assaulted. No matter how much he repudiates the views others have of him, he has little to no ability to effectively address or alter them. Consequently, he suppresses his feelings while planting the seeds of rage.

***The Wound of Rage***

Many youth of color, like their adult counterparts, suffer from the race-related trauma wound of rage. It is virtually impossible to be the depository of perpetual negative and debilitating messages and have one’s sense of self assaulted without experiencing rage. Rage can be a deep-seated emotional response to experiences of degradation and devaluation. Rage builds over time as a result of cumulative suppressed emotions precipitated by voicelessness. It is distinguishable from anger, which is an emotion connected to immediate experiences. Rage is a very complex emotion that can appear as anger, explosiveness, sadness, and depression. Youth of color are often prescribed anger management interventions, while rage from the hidden wound of racial oppression remains unaddressed.

***The Case of a Nobody***

Fourteen-year-old Assad sat nervously shaking his left leg while staring off to a far-off place. He appeared disengaged and verbally unresponsive to questions posed by his therapist while passively expressing disdain for having to be present. Intermittently, he would check the time on his cell phone which produced an audible sigh. After twenty minutes of attempts to engage Assad, a break-through finally came. He looked at his therapist and asked in a very soft voice: “Why are you wasting your time?”

“What do you mean?” his therapist responded.

“With me,” he stated flatly.

“Well, I don’t consider this a waste of time at all. In fact, there are ways in which you remind me of myself years ago,” the therapist noted.

Assad quickly dismissed the claim and noted, “There is no way I can remind you of you or anybody else!”

Surprised by Assad’s expression of such strong emotion, the therapist cautiously asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m a NOBODY....I ain’t s--- and never gonna be s---...and that’s a fact, so you are wasting your time.”

“I just wonder whose voice that is that you are repeating, because that is not how I see you or what my experience with you has been. I see you as a gifted young brother.”

Assad became quickly animated and slightly agitated as he stated: “Then you are clueless Doc...and WHOSE voice? ...WHOSE voice? You wanna know whose voice? It’s everybody’s voice. It’s my mom’s voice, which is why she don’t come around more. It’s my dad’s voice, which is why he has never stepped up. It’s the f---in’ cops’ voices, which is why they just dis’ us, beat us, and kill us like we are a bunch of f---in’ animals. It’s the teachers’ voices who come right out and tell you in so many words that you dumb as s--- and you ain’t going to be nothing. C’mon Doc, you better get with it. You can’t be as dumb as you trying to sound, dog. Look at Obama and all those smarts that he has. He gets the same message. They let him know that ‘Yo, you might be President and s---, but you still ain’t nobody....as far as we are concerned you are just another nigger!’”

Beneath Assad's seemingly disjointed and accusatory "outbursts" are the hidden wounds of racial oppression. His sense of hopelessness, despair, and rage are the by-products of chronic and repeated experiences of being systematically devalued and having his sense of self assaulted. His "angry self-absolving rant" lacks psychological sophistication, appropriate usage of Standard English, or evidence of any understanding of the nameless condition that plagues him. Still, it accurately describes the world of a youth of color in a society that seems hopelessly organized by race. But since Assad is clueless about the hidden wounds that shape how he sees himself, he cannot see the wall-less prison that racial oppression has placed around him.

For many youth of color, such issues are central to their healing and transformation but seldom addressed. Traditional interventions designed to "help" Assad and those like him would focus on goals such as: a) being more accountable and taking responsibility for his actions; b) being more respectful and using less profanity; c) examining his usage of the "N" word; d) getting his mother more involved in the treatment process; e) processing his feelings regarding the loss of a relationship with his father; e) anger management; and f) setting more positive goals for himself. While these goals are highly germane to the "rehabilitation" and "transformation" of Assad, they do very little to address the hidden wounds of racial oppression.

### ***Healing Hidden Wounds***

We may not be able to prevent youth of color from being exposed to racially injurious and traumatizing conditions (Calvert, 1997). However, it is imperative that treatment protocols integrate steps to heal these hidden wounds. This does not require abandoning established treatment methods, but incorporating effective strategies to address racial oppression within standard operating procedures. Promoting healing involves eight critical and inter-related steps which are summarized below:

*Step One: Affirmation and Acknowledgement.* It is important for the helping professional to convey a general understanding and acceptance of the premise that race is a critical organizing principle in society. Through affirmation and acknowledgement, we allow conversations about race to emerge.

*Step Two: Create Space for Race.* Conveying a sense of openness and curiosity, we take a very proactive role in encouraging conversations about race. An effort is

made to identify race as a significant variable, and we encourage youth to talk openly and candidly about race and their respective experiences with it.

*Step Three: Racial Storytelling.* Young people are invited to share personal stories of racial experiences. This enables them to develop their voices and begin to think critically about their experiences growing up as youth of color. Examples of specific questions to encourage storytelling are: 1) Can you tell me a story about the first time you realized you were treated differently because of your race? 2) Can you tell me about a time when someone attempted to dis' you based on your race? 3) Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt proud to be (Asian, Latino, African American, Native American, etc.)? Youth gain a better understanding of how their lives are affected by race, and they expose hidden wounds embedded in their life stories.

*Step Four: Validation.* This is a tool for counteracting devaluation and an assaulted sense of self. Validation is much more specific and personalized than



the affirmation and acknowledgement process described in Step One. Rather than conveying a global knowledge about race, validation provides confirmation of a youth's worldview and worth. We also discover strengths and redeemable qualities of the young person, and the youth's small acts of heroism are pointed out. Although suffering from internalized devaluation and an assaulted sense of self, there is an untapped hero within that has been overshadowed by stereotyping, pathologizing, demonizing, and criminalizing. For example, when Angel shared his gut-wrenching experiences on the subway where he was presumed to be a criminal, it would be important to validate the *untapped hero within* who is perceptive, sensitive, and able to exercise incredible restraint during the midst of such painful and infuriating racial micro-aggressions.

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*Step Five: The Process of Naming.* One of the most debilitating aspects of racial oppression is that this is a nameless condition, difficult to describe, quantify, or codify. Lacking a common language to convey what is happening deepens the self-doubt/self-denigration cycle. The major objective of this step is to affix words to racially based experiences. This offers external and consensual validation to racially oppressed youth and helps restore their voices. As we "name" the hidden wounds of racial oppression, we help youth understand how their lives are significantly impacted by them.

*Step Six: Externalize Devaluation.* This is a direct way to heal the wounds of internalized devaluation. Stated simply, we help youth understand why respect and the absence of respect are so important. They learn to recognize that devaluation and disrespect are directly connected to race and race oppression. Further, some of their problem behavior may have been counterproductive ways to try to gain respect. The goal is to increase their thirst for respect and to recognize that assaults on their dignity do not lessen their self-worth.

*Step Seven: Counteract Devaluation.* The process of externalization described above helps youth of color exhale and expunge the societal toxins regarding who they allegedly are. Step Seven endeavors

to provide an array of resources (emotional, psychological, and behavioral) that help build their strengths and provide a buffer against future assaults to their dignity and sense of self. This is vital if they are to successfully cope in the face of unrelenting messages from the broader society that can have a debilitating effect on their sense of self.

*Step Eight: Rechanneling Rage.* The pain of rage is a normal and predictable response to perpetual experiences with degradation, devaluation, and domination. It is the build-up and culmination of emotions that have been blocked expression (Gil, Vega, & Turner, 2002). As previously noted, there is a strong relationship between voicelessness and rage. Unless rage is properly channeled, it can be all-consuming, displaced, and destructive to self and others. Those who have rage are often enraged for good reasons. Thus, the goal of treatment is not to rid them of their rage but instead to help them be aware of it, gain control of it, and ultimately to redirect it.

Rechanneled rage can be a powerful energy source helping youth of color to discover and cultivate what is great in and about them. It drives them to stand again after they have been knocked down, to try again after not succeeding, and to believe in themselves when all others around them fail to do so. These are the positive outcomes of healing the hidden wounds of racial oppression.

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