

Mindful Connections with African American Clients

By Isom E. White, LCSW



FROM THE EDITOR: *“Passionate, powerful, and purposeful. I implore you to read this.”*

The question is this: How do you (a non-African American) mindfully engage with your Black/African American clients on matters of racial injustice and police brutality?

Given the recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and the abysmal *history* of Black/African Americans dying by the hands of White/European American police officers in the United States, I must use my privilege and platform to help my fellow therapists navigate these cyclically tragic and traumatic events—traumatic events that get passed down from generation to generation and become an entire community’s truth. It is a shared truth that must be acknowledged for meaningful healing to take place.

Before I can even begin to help White/European American therapists show up for clients of color in the therapy room, I have to ask some critical questions. **Please, reflect on whether or not you are making your services available to the Black community and other communities of color.** How many Black/African American (or other persons of color) clients are currently on your caseload? Is there one? Five? One percent? Or five percent? Do you accept insurance or private pay only? Do you offer a sliding-fee scale? Do you accept Medicaid? If not, are you aware that these could be barriers to receiving your services for communities of color? Are you willing to change your practice to be more accessible to communities of color? Are you willing to accept less money? Are you willing to sacrifice the extra time that it takes to become paneled by insurance companies?

Can you hold in your awareness and accept that you may have unconsciously constructed these barriers to distance yourself from serving Blacks and other minority communities? **We haven’t even entered the therapy room and there is so much work to be done.**

Are you willing to educate yourself on the history of police brutality and systemic racism in the United States and its effects on the Black community? Furthermore, are you willing to accept this as truth for your Black/African American clients? Are you willing to accept the abhorrent history of White supremacy in America as a part of your truth and understanding? Can you become aware of the resistance or discomfort in doing this extra “work”? Let’s be honest, you already have a full caseload, a family, a partner, and your own issues/trauma in which to deal. Can you locate the sensation of discomfort in your body? Are you willing to accept that discomfort, breathe into it, and create the space needed within yourself to provide more compassion towards your Black/African American clients?

A helpful place to start understanding and educating oneself on the effects of White supremacy and systemic racism on the Black/African American community can be found in literature. **I strongly recommend that you read, *The New Jim Crow Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander.**

Let me pause and refocus the direction into the therapy room.

Mindful Connections with African American Clients - Continued from page 7

As a White/European American clinician sitting across from your Black/African American client you are witness to the recent murders of their community members, the subsequent televised and demonized grief response, and your current position of power as a healthcare provider. **What do you notice is happening within you as you sit across from them?** Are you nervous about them bringing up their trauma from recent events? Are you uncomfortable processing their own experiences of overt and covert racism? Are you becoming present to moments when you have acted on your own prejudices? Do you notice feelings of guilt or shame for doing so? Are you insecure about your ability to sit with their trauma? Are you outraged, disturbed, and traumatized by your witnessing of a VERY public execution? Are you confused? Do you have questions? Are you able to notice what's happening in your body as these thoughts cross your mind? Do you notice the urge to approach or avoid the conversation? And can you breathe acceptance into those urges, emotions, and thoughts?

In doing so, even if you are partially successful, you may be able to practice the compassionate stillness it takes to be present to the trauma experienced by the Black community.

Holding all those reflections in a nice and neat little compartment as all therapists are so skillfully trained to do, you can begin the session. **And as your client sits across from you, here are a few tips on how to begin.**

1. Meet the client where they are. *"Where would you like to begin today?"* This invites your client of color to broach the topic of current events or not. Don't assume that just because it's happening and they're Black that they wish to talk about it in therapy.
2. If the client wishes to process their feelings about their current or past traumatic experiences with racism, **ACKNOWLEDGE** your race, privilege as a person of non-color, and your inability to fully understand the Black experience. *"I have no idea what it's like to be a person of color."*
3. Be mindful of your inner experience when your client is processing. Do you notice urges to avoid their trauma? Do you notice your own insecurities? Do you notice the urge to assuage your own guilt? Try to avoid asking, "How can I help?" Instead, try tip #4.
4. Be mindful and curious of their experience in the therapy. *"What is it like to process these feelings with a White /European American person?"* Can you notice shifts in their body language? Breathing? Can you notice if and when transference and countertransference has entered the therapy room?

Lastly, and most importantly. The best piece of advice I can offer to White/European American clinicians showing up for your Black/African American clients is to do the **RESEARCH** on America's history of *systemic* racism, so that you can **WORK** to acknowledge your **PRIVILEGE** without prejudice, which will then open space for you to remain present and truly **LISTEN** and empathize with the experience of being Black in America.

Isom E. White, LCSW, graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology at Kennesaw State University in 2011, and with a Master of Social Work from the University of Georgia in 2015. He enjoys working with a variety of populations: late-adolescents, young adults and adults, LGBTQ+, and executive professionals who are dealing with anxiety, depression, anger, grief & loss, trauma, and life-transitional issues. Isom also embraces working with men's issues, high achievers/perfectionists, and healthcare providers. As an African American therapist, he holds a strong commitment to enhancing the quality of life and empowering people of African ancestry through advocacy, human services delivery, and research. Isom incorporates mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral interventions including Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) to enhance the therapeutic process by cultivating non-judgmental awareness, compassion, and purpose. You can find Isom E. White at Counseling Associates for Well-Being at 3050 Atlanta Rd, Smyrna, GA 30080. You can reach him at 706-389-1708.