Black People Value Hard-to-Find Same-Race Therapists

Many African Americans feel Black mental health counselors relate better to their experiences of Black trauma.

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Paying someone to listen to and analyze your problems is perhaps more popular and socially acceptable than ever before. In 2019, 19.2% of adults reported that they had either taken prescription medication for a mental health condition, seen a therapist for a mental health condition or both in the previous 12 months, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, the dearth of Black therapists in the United States disadvantages Black people seeking counseling.

At the height of the pandemic, many Black people reported an increase in feelings of anxiety and depression. In many cases, their symptoms arose not only as a result of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on Black and brown people but also of the cultural reckoning with police brutality that followed the much-publicized murder of George Floyd in May 2020.

Some African Americans in therapy became aware of a fundamental disconnect between themselves and the white practitioners they saw after only a few appointments. One Bonner Springs, Kansas, couple, Cleveland and T'erra Chatmon, experienced this dynamic firsthand, according to The Beacon. Since many of their mental health woes were rooted in or exacerbated by experiences with overt and covert discrimination, they eventually came to believe that only same-race psychologists could fully comprehend the cumulative impact of systemic racism on Black people's physical and emotional health.

"When I spoke with white therapists, I had a real strong fear of being judged," Cleveland told the local news site. "After that experience, I kind of shied away from counseling."

In 2019, Black people constituted 3% of psychologists nationwide, according to the American Psychological Association, making them quite rare. "What brought me to the field itself was the lack of brown and Black therapists," Centurion Johnson, the owner of the Black-owned private practice Journey Embraced in Kansas City, Missouri, told The Beacon. He added, "There are not many Black therapists out here."

According to experts, reasons for the disparity may include the implicit bias embedded in

psychological practices and conclusions and the widespread stigma regarding mental illness and therapy in many Black communities. In 2019, 19.8% of non-Hispanic white adults accessed mental health care, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. In contrast, only 9.8% of Black adults did the same.

The Chatmons have since started working with practitioners at Journey Embraced. Their experience with Johnson has further strengthened their sense that effective mental health treatment for Black people involves an element of racial solidarity.

“If I had to go to somebody that was not of color, I wouldn’t be as open,” T’erra Chatmon told The Beacon. “He gets it.”

Several Black celebrities have recently spoken out about the importance of prioritizing mental health. Read “Taraji P. Henson Talks Mental Health and Healing” and “Simone Biles Becomes an Advocate for Mental Health” for their full stories.

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