

Chapter 9

Race, Imposter Thoughts, and Healing: A Black Man's Journey in Self- Discovery While Working at a PWI

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is concerned with acknowledging the mental health issues that Black men face in higher education. Research is presented and blended with lived experiences of being a full-time employee and doctoral student on a primarily white campus. This chapter focuses on the emotional trauma of Black men, imposter phenomenon traits, and offers strategies for healing from critical race theorist. Strategies to keep higher education institutions accountable for the hiring and retaining of Black men are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Being Black and male brings unique gender, cultural, and social stressors that can impact mental health (Alvarez, Liang, & Neville, 2016; Robinson, Jones-Eversley, Moore, Ravenell, and Adedoyin, 2018). Although all minorities are subject to both covert and overt white hegemonic practices in higher education, Comas-Díaz, Hall and Neville (2019) suggest African Americans are more exposed to racial discrimination than other ethno-racial group. Further, Daniels (2019) notes that Black professionals are often “judged through problematic racial filters, creating additional hurdles, and barriers (p. 34). Anecdotally, one Black male professional articulates his experiences with race while working in higher education, “you have to understand [that there is] a thing called open racism and there is hidden racism. I see a lot of hidden racism in higher education.” (Turner & Guarholz, 2017, p. 217). Ironically, Black men are charged with the “duty of successfully navigating white dominant institutions while at the same

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time teaching about how important diversity and inclusion are” (p. 151). Furthermore, researchers refer to the clear empirical evidence supporting the association between greater experiences with racial discrimination and depression among persons of color (p. 4). These mental health impacts have been confirmed by the United States Surgeon General who stated that racial and ethnic health disparities were likely due to racism (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

Consequences of these emotional burdens can lead to “increased levels of stress, burnout, decreases in job performance, and satisfaction over time” (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016, p. 195). Students’ interactions and learning are also negatively affected when the mental health of Black male professionals are compromised. For example, Brooms and Brice (2017) are two Black male professors and posit that their racialized identities impact how [professionals and students] receive content - and resist it as well, “we are seen before we are heard; thus, the way students and professionals see us influences the way they hear us” (p. 151). These burdens are exacerbated for Black identifying professionals who may identify in non-binary ways. (Comas-Diaz, Hall & Neville, 2019).

Although there are many tools and strategies to understand one’s trauma and begin healing, Comas-Diaz, Hall and Neville (2019) note that Black men require unique methods to properly begin the healing process. Traditional methods of coping with these harms are incomplete as “racial trauma carries psychological and physiological effects like: hypervigilance to threat; flashbacks; nightmares; avoidance; suspiciousness; headaches and heart palpitations” (pp. 1-2). Research shows that being a Black male on campus can bring experiences that exhaust the body, mind and spirit, thus, it is important to gain a clear and complete understanding of the trauma, in order to heal.

Unfortunately, these unique burdens do not begin for Black men once their offer letter is signed. Burdens begin for Black boys in childhood, when they hear the common, yet problematic statement, “you must work twice as hard to get half as far as your white counterparts.” I was told this message as a young boy, but it never was applied until I entered community college at age 24. After a “career” of D.J’ing, and a short stay in the county jail; grit and perseverance became the primary tool to be successful in higher education, and to get my life back on track. These concepts worked well for me while earning my A.A., B.A., & M.A. degrees. With these tools, I was able to replace self-doubt with longer study times. With each course passed, I found an increase in my appetite for more ambitious academic and professional undertakings. Life was good.

However, after enrolling in my doctoral program while still working as a full-time student advisor, I have noticed a peculiar, consistent fatigue in my mental state. Attempting to “work twice as hard” feels like starting a lawn mower to no avail. Although I motivate myself in numerous ways through the notion of grit and perseverance, I find that they do not quite motivate me as well as they did in the past. As I continue to work full-time and matriculate through my doctoral program, new feelings of being an imposter within the academy have re-emerged, which is linked to personality traits such as conscientiousness and neuroticism” (Hutchings & Rainbolt, 2018, p. 197).

These imposter feelings are consistent with research which suggests that when grit does not work, imposter phenomenon can emerge, leading to self-doubt and feelings of depression (Hutchings and Rainbolt, 2017). Common characteristics of imposter phenomenon often look like individuals explaining their success as getting lucky, avoiding praise, and discounting their success, with the strongest indicator being “persistent self-doubt regarding intelligence and ability” (Hutchings and Rainbolt 201, p. 194). Researchers find that these feelings are common in career faculty, women, or minorities and minority professionals in fields where they are traditionally under-represented. They often face bias to their professional inclusion and legitimacy.

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