

Spoken Word Therapy and Mental Wellness in the Black Community

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We have all watched over the past several weeks the political and social unrest in America. People have taken to the streets, protesting around the world, wanting and demanding their voices be heard surrounding the many deaths of unarmed Black men and women by police. What appears to have been a moment in time, has taken on a life of its own and become an international movement- "Black Lives Matter". This movement is often met with the backlash that "All Lives Matter", but for the purpose of this paper, I am focusing on Black Americans who have historically had to defend their lives. In spite of having to deal with COVID-19 and all the other social ills, Black Americans are challenged on a daily basis with regards to their race, adverse experiences, mental health, and other struggles.

As a therapist there has to be a medium for one to express his or her emotions in positive ways. Spoken word is not new, as it has been around since the ancient of times even prior to printed words. African culture entails oral history, storytelling, and drum talking. Black Americans have relied on this as a method to express their deepest pains, sorrows, and regrets.

Spoken word is a form of expression that allows the listeners to travel emotionally with the speaker concerning what and how they feel about particular topics, whether it is a message about race, racism, sexism, or anti-bullying. One can find spoken words on various platforms: YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Button Poetry, Talk Cafe and Ted Talks. Spoken words are often poems that encompass social justice, politics, and race relationships in the community that can be combined with music such as jazz, hip hop, R&B and pop. Spoken word is often performed in competitive settings such as the local, state, and national poetry slams.

During the Civil Rights Movement several popular speeches were influenced by the rhythmic movement of spoken words: Martin Luther King's, I Have A Dream; Sojourner Truth's, Ain't I a Woman; and Booker T. Washington's, Cast Down Your Buckets, just to name a few. The words spewed out of these men and women during these times stirred the souls of the African- American communities and other nationalities across the land. They encouraged individuals to take a stand for equal rights and justice for all.

Therefore, it will only seem natural during these fragile times in America to use the same rhythmic language to express one's feelings. Therapy is place where the client is allowed to express his or her feelings in a non-judgmental and empathic environment. The atmosphere is safe, genuine, and eludes positive self-regard. Thus, using spoken words can encourage emotional exploration and allow the client to self-actualize the pinned up emotions they might not otherwise be able to address.

Poetry therapy, music therapy, bibliotherapy, and cinemetherapy are creative ways to allow your clients to express their emotions. Spoken words are the language that can be easily subscribed to an oppressed community for their emotional currency. Due to the murders

of unarmed Black men and women (e.g. George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, Philando Castillo, Alton Sterling, Freddie Grey, Eric Garner, Tamika Rice, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown and Trevon Martin), individuals are looking for ways to properly express themselves and allow their voices to be heard among others.

I recommend the use of spoken words as an avenue to allow clients to express their emotions around these sort of tragedies. Indeed, this will allow the client to express his or her emotions in a positive way. In addition, a spoken word can give clients a platform to connect with other people in the community. Spoken words do not have to be done alone, but can be done as a form of group therapy that would allow several people to be involved in the process and receive emotional healing.

I have provided an example of the work that I have developed during the death of Mr. George Floyd, which ignited an outbreak of protesting and rage all over the world. I hope this example allow the readers to see first-hand how one might use a spoken word as a form of healing in the Black community.

God Bless America - You Got to Take Your Knee Off My Neck

Greetings my brothers and sisters,

What's going on?

Power to the people!

Say it loud- I am young, Black, gifted and proud.

Oh, hear my cry! My country tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, oh thee I sing.

God Bless America- You got to take your knee off my neck.

Oh, how many ways do you have your knee on my neck?

Over and over and over and over again.

I have requested for higher pay.

I am a minimum wage worker.

Now, because of COVID-19, I am called an "Essential Worker," which means I go the work each and every day in harm's way.

I am so "essential!" Several of you refuse to wear your masks and stay six feet away.

However, many of you do and I thank God for you!

God Bless America - You got to take your knee off my neck.

I have requested for better housing and better schools for my neighborhood. Yet, you turned your head and looked the other way.

God Bless America - You got to take your knee off my neck.

Better higher education programs and equally funded HBCU's. Just in case you don't know what "HBCU's" are- Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

When it comes to wealth distribution, you say you ain't got none. However, somehow, someway, the Big Ten are able to get tons of funds.

God Bless America- You got to take your knee off my neck.

I am economically disenfranchised, educationally deprived, disproportionately discriminated against

Racism is real!

God Bless America- You got take your knee off my neck.

People in the streets, protesting, trying to take a stand, and wanting their voices to be heard for equal justice and equal rights.

Carrying signs: "I can't breathe" and "Hands up, Don't shoot". But yet, you shoot us anyway.

America, we will breathe!

God Bless America- You will take your knee off my neck.

We have written poems and poetry in the back ally and in the cotton fields. Written books with no lights.

We have danced,

We have sung,

We have cried,

We have marched.

James Baldwin wrote- The Fire Next Time

Billy Holiday- Strange Fruit

We shall overcome. We will overcome; not someday, but today.

God Bless America- You will take your knee off my neck.

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Please keep in mind emotional mental health literacy is important in order for the community to heal from past and present day racial trauma.

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