Dear Black Professionals of AAMFT,

In the beginning of my doctoral studies, I had politely asked my Black cohort members if they could meet with me after class. Nervous and with hesitation, I introduced myself to them, letting them know how I had attended the Masters in Couple and Family Therapy program the previous two years. We all made sure to emphasize our mutual excitement about the years to come, along with the new journey we would take as Black doctoral students. I then began to let them know that I had been involved in the Black Student Association at school and did lots of community work, mostly with Chicago’s Assata’s Daughters, outside of our program, in order to stay engaged in social and political events. As I began to welcome them, ask them about their feelings regarding current events, and unconsciously verbalize my role as “cohort Mom” or “Mama Cherry,” as my peers would say, I was interrupted by one of them.

He gently stated, “I don’t mean to cut you off. But how are you? You asked how we were but I genuinely want to know how you’re doing.”

I simply stated, “I’m good.”

He replied, “Well you seem to do a lot and we don’t often leave room nor space to ask those who take care of the community to express how they feel. So, how are you really doing?”

Silent tears streamed down my face as I swiftly wiped them away, trying to restrain the deep wail that inched closer to my throat. I felt that my pain did not exceed that which some of you, my sisters and brothers, were feeling as you drove to work with your partners and children in the backseat or as some of our brothers and sisters sold CDs outside of a gas station, not knowing if any day would be the last day “I love you” is exchanged with a dear one. For the past few years, I had read about or watched videos of my Black brothers and sisters being shot and murdered repeatedly. Sometimes I watched these videos by choice and other times I watched because it played, non-consensually, in a store window, presented as “breaking news” throughout the day. Over time, I grew numb to it.

So many of these incidents occurred, that the storylines and people involved were often muddled and challenging to thoroughly recall (Hill & Lee, 2015). We formed lists with the names of those murdered, added next to hashtags as quickly as coconut oil melts on a simmering summer day. In 2015, America’s Independence day was the prelude to two murders that added salt to the multiple wounds of bondage that we, as Black Americans, have carried since our ancestors’ feet were forcefully placed on this soil. Alton Sterling and Philando Castile’s names were added to the list. I shared half a coffin of thoughts with my peers that day, only allowing a little room to fully mourn.
Now, I ask you the same question my cohort members were so compassionate to ask me. How are you? How have you been? And when you answer these questions, please take the time to sit with them along with your possible answers. Try to get away from the automatic “okay” and other one-word responses, avoiding the impact of racial oppression. Remove the cape that the world has made you wear or that you felt the need to place upon yourself. Set the cape to the side. How are your shoulders, back, hands, and feet? Where do you notice any strains, tension, and even ease? Lastly, how is your mind? We often do full body checks with our clients but when was the last time you checked in with yourself, specifically surrounding mass trauma?

I wanted to check in with you and see how you were doing in the midst of the current racial climate. While I could talk extensively about global anti-Blackness that permeates our discourse and social expression, my focus is the response and effect of the racially oppressive events within the United States for the past five years. Many, including those within our field, might overlook these events as having an impact on us or not even acknowledge it as being a part of the environmental and social impact that pervades how we show up for our clients. Nonetheless, the reality is that state sanctioned violence against Black people takes a toll on all of us (Range, Gutierrez, Gamboni, Hough, & Wojciak, 2018).

Embodying and using the systemic lens within our field, which our ancestors have instilled in our value system for centuries, many non-Black therapists and therapists in training may forget how Afrocentricity or the Afrocentric paradigm suggests everyone and everything to be connected and influenced by one another (Fairfax, 2017). We know that Black people are not a homogenous group and are a beautiful and diverse people; nevertheless, there are multiple cultural values and experiences that are shared amongst us with mass trauma being one experience (Range et. al, 2018; Wilkins, Whiting, Watson, Russon, & Moncrief, 2013). As a result of the mass trauma experienced, I am stuck with feeling grief, rage, sadness, fear, and confusion, among others, that I have yet to name or explore. This is what I feel as I hear, witness, and experience the violence of racism. This was the rage that I had read about which leaves the body numb. Yes, I had the ability to channel my own rage through activism and even therapy, but after a while, it felt as though my hope was beginning to decay. Did you happen to feel the same thing? Not only did I fear for my own well-being, but I feared for all of you who look like me. America does not see the credentials you have when you leave your place of work, drive your car, and do any other daily task. Unconsciously, you’re seen as some form of a threat, as well.

I do apologize that as America witnessed the acquisition of Black names after images of Black people were murdered at the hands of White supremacy and fear, you were expected to tend to others’ pain and families’ hurts devoid of possibly suffering from the communal losses left unacknowledged. Did your place of work or school have supportive conversations surrounding these events? Did anyone share their impressions of these occurrences or did they only ask you to share how you felt with them? I hope and pray that your MFT peers were able to practice what is often taught or have learned when it concerns social justice and multiculturalism within healing and relationship building. If you have not been able to have that experience, I hope you have at least been able to connect with your Black peers in the field to talk about this.

I am so grateful to have had the chance to share my thoughts of these current events with others within my program who could relate to how I felt. We were able to cry with one another, hold each other accountable to weekly check-ins, and continue building a community amongst our cohort for extra support. Creating a sense of community has always been one way that we as Black Americans have maintained resilience (FairFax, 2017; Range et. al, 2018; & Wilkins et.al, 2013). Having the ability to validate and affirm each other’s experiences during times of struggle, as well as success, makes me appreciate our cultural bond even more.

You leave me with hope. I appreciate you taking the time to smile or wave even when you do not want to, or when you simply cannot because the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Because of our shared past history and present experiences, we continue to greet each other as family. Literature calls it fictive kin, but we have come to see how our melanin can create a bond just as strong as our DNA. This is a part of our resilience.

Your sister,
Cherry

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References

