

Why Don't African-Americans go to Therapy?

By Tonya Ladipo, LSW

There are many different ideas about why we don't seek therapy. Some believe that it is only for wealthy, White people, others believe that you don't go outside the family with your problems. Some of these thoughts keep us struggling more than we need to. Here are some of the more prevalent ones.

"But I'm not touched"

Many of us think you have to be "touched" or "crazy" to go to therapy." While it's true that some people with mental health issues seek therapy, it's really a service for anyone. Therapy is a paid service that connects you with a trained professional who provides you with the support you need to live a healthier and happier life.

When I first met "Andre" he was apprehensive about seeking therapy. For many months, he questioned whether or not he should be in therapy. Overall, he felt that his life was manageable and that he did not have *enough* problems to go to therapy, after all he had a job and people who cared about him. He certainly was *not* "crazy". After several discussions about the purpose of therapy and its benefits to him as a rationale person, Andre accepted his desire for therapy.

In fact, in a recent session Andre said that the healthiest people he knows are all in therapy. He realizes that therapy is a place that can benefit everyone, not just a small segment of the population. Andre further explained that the people he knows who have the most problems *aren't* in therapy.

Of course, as a therapist, this makes perfect sense to me. Recognizing that your life is not how you want it to be or that you need additional support takes a lot of courage and self-reflection. These are not the thoughts of a "crazy" person. Rather, this is the thought process of someone who has a sense of who they are and wants more from their life and themselves.

"I can talk to my friends and family"

Why do you need to go outside of your family/church/friendship circle to get the help and support you want? Sometimes, you don't. But sometimes, going outside of that comfortable and familiar circle will propel you to make the changes that you want to. When people talk with their family or friends, many times they don't tell them everything that's going on in their head or in their lives. This isn't to be deceptive, but because you care about your family and friends and you care what they think about you.

Keisha came to see me because she was thinking about leaving her husband. She recently found out that he had an affair. Her family adored her husband and she was afraid of what they would say. She hadn't made up her mind about leaving, but she needed someone to talk to, someone who wouldn't immediately tell her what to do, whether that meant leaving or staying.

When you're concerned with what the other person is thinking and feeling, you cannot focus on yourself and your own needs 100%. That's the benefit of therapy. You can share all of your thoughts and feelings without being concerned about the therapist. In doing this, you can focus on you, what you need, what you want, and

ways to accomplish that. Sometimes people are more honest when they go outside their circle of family and friends. As backwards as it may sound, it can be easier to talk to a stranger, easier to share your feelings, fears and pleasures with someone who you do not see everyday.

Keisha was relieved to talk about her marriage, what her husband did wrong and what she did wrong with someone who did not judge her or tell her what to do. This freedom allowed her to be honest with herself and decide what she believed to be best for her. Ultimately, she decided to stay and work on her marriage. Keisha said that she was glad that she used therapy to help her sort this out. Had she gone to a friend, they might have told her to leave “that no good” And her family may have told her to stay in the marriage, to stick it out “for better or worse”. Keisha realized that she needed to come to her decision on her own, not to be told by others what to do.

Does this mean that your family and friends aren’t helpful to you? Absolutely not. Instead, it means that therapy can add to the support that they provide, by giving you support in a very different way. Therapy can provide you with an objective person who can help you review your options as you decide what is best for you.

“It’s just another racist system”

As African-Americans, we are aware of the persistent racism in our country. This is true on a large scale as well as in our daily interactions. We have many reasons to be suspicious of outsiders, to be distrustful of their motivations and actions. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment is a perfect example of why we are wary of outsiders.¹

Our schools consistently peg our children as aggressive, out of control, and low achieving. We have to fight to receive the same service as our White counterparts, whether it’s in our schools, hospitals or office. Going to therapy poses another opportunity to encounter racism and discrimination if you’re met with an insensitive or ignorant therapist.

When I worked in an agency, I often saw African-American clients who said in the first session, “I’m so relieved that you’re Black.” Some said that they felt more comfortable with an African-American therapist because they could talk about life and their culture without having to teach or explain the basics. Others did not like the racism they encountered with White therapists.

“Ayanna”, an African-American woman in her 30’s with two children, previously met with a White therapist before coming to see me. She was put off when the therapist began asking questions. The therapist wanted to know about her educational history and was surprised when Ayanna said that she went to college. She then asked how many years of college Ayanna completed, rather than assuming that Ayanna had a college degree, as she does. When the therapist asked about Ayanna’s children and family, she asked if the children had the same father and where was he? At this point Ayanna knew that she wouldn’t be comfortable with a therapist

¹ In 1932 the U.S. government intentionally injected African-American sharecroppers with syphilis to witness the effects of the disease. They knowingly withheld medication and treatment that would have prevented blindness or saved lives that were lost as a result of the disease.

who assumed that she was not formally educated and had children with different men simply because she is African-American.

Why African-Americans can benefit from therapy

"So why bother?"

With all of the struggles and oppressions that we face on a daily basis we need an outlet. We need a comfortable environment where we can talk about the impact oppression has on us and talk about healthy and productive ways to deal with it. Holding in the pain, frustration, anger, and sadness eats at you, leaving you feeling angry and dissatisfied, not a rewarding way to go through life.

When you find an effective therapist, therapy can be a place to gain support and find more satisfying ways to live life. It is the one place, perhaps the only place, where you don't have to have all of the answers *and* you don't have to worry about the person sitting across from you. It is a place where you only have to worry about yourself and your needs.

Therapy provides an objective perspective from a trained professional. The therapist's objectivity comes from not having a personal relationship with you. The therapist knows you now, as you are, not as you were. They can provide feedback based on what they see now, not based on how you used to be. Although our family and friends may love us and provide us with support, they cannot be objective like an outsider. Unlike personal relationships, a therapist has no ulterior motives; the only motive is to make the changes in your life that you decide to make.

How can African-Americans find a therapist?

First, figure out what is important to you. Do you care what race your therapist is? What about gender? If you think that seeing an African-American therapist is necessary for you to be open and honest with them, then look for that. If you're not sure, then try a few different therapists out and see what feels right to you. Also, don't be afraid to ask for what you want. Remember, this is a service that you're paying for; you are the client. As a paying customer, you have the right to ask for what you want. From there, the therapist can tell you if they are able to provide that service. If they cannot, ask them to give you referrals until you find what you're looking for.

Before scheduling an initial session, determine the therapist's fee and make sure that you can afford it. Therapy is a useful tool that helps people in times of crisis and fosters growth in times of reflection. However, it is not as useful if you are not committed to it. So make sure that you can afford the therapist you choose. If you have to alter your budget to afford it that's fine; if it obliterates your budget then look for someone with a lower fee. If you have to cut out dining out 3 times a week or paying for your morning coffees, that's altering your budget. If you cannot afford to pay your rent/mortgage, that's obliterating your budget. Finally, don't forget what you already know. You get what you pay for. Do higher prices mean better service? Not necessarily, but a quality and effective therapist will charge within the average range for the area.

When you're ready to enhance your life or get help with a current crisis, a therapist might be just the one to call.