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Counseling African-American women with the Sistas Embracing Empowerment (SEE) model

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Leading clients to SEE—Sistas Embracing Empowerment:
counseling strategies for Black women experiencing race and gender related distress

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Abstract

Research from the last two decades indicates that Black women have faced extreme mental health challenges in overcoming experiences of isolation, depression and somatization. Unfortunately, the sources of these stressors are largely attributed to racial and gender discrimination, and societal expectations and norms associated with Black women. Additionally, minimal research has been conducted to determine the most effective counseling approaches to aid this population. A current literature review of published research from practitioners and researchers in the field, along with feminist scholars, supports this claim.

Exploration of theories such as the Black superwoman myth and multiple jeopardies/identities reveals that culturally relevant and specific counseling strategies for Black women must be implemented to appropriately help empower clients struggling with these concerns. Counseling rooted in womanist versus feminist theory is suggested. Additionally, the infusion of the “Sista” Intervention, Herstory, Empowerment, Rapport and Spirituality (H.E.R.S.) model, and group therapy supplemented by bibliotherapy is offered. The collaboration of these approaches aim to provide an eclectic and culturally respectful intervention strategy to employ in both individual and support group counseling for Black women experiencing such distress. A case study and example of proposed interventions have also been included as a demonstration of how the collaboration of these interventions can ultimately lead “sistas” blinded by the frustrations of race and gender related stress in their lives to “SEE”—Sistas Embracing Empowerment.

“What will it take to get rid of the burdens that lie heavily in the bosom of my heart? What will it take to simply survive the challenges of being an African-American woman in the United States?” (Moore & Madison-Colmore, 2005).

In this paper, the term Black is used to refer to persons who identify themselves as being of African descent, and White refers to those that identify themselves as being from European , non-Hispanic descent.

Early theoretical approaches to counseling did not value multiculturalism, and therefore did not honor the contextual development of multiple individual realities and societal circumstances that often challenge people of color (Jones & Hodges, 2001). Facing “multiple jeopardies” (King, 1988), Black women are often predisposed to experiencing discrimination that cannot be compartmentalized, and racism and sexism are often the visible oppressions that Black women experience. However, other “isms” (heterosexism, discrimination associated with socio-economic status, and physical and psychological ability) may contribute to anxiety, stress, depression, somatization and a diminished sense of life satisfaction in Black women’s lives. The Black woman’s experience may also manifest into isolation, exclusion, internalized oppression and invisibility. (Bryant et. al, 2005; Jones & Hodges, 2001; Moore & Madison, 2005).

Research consistently contends that Black women often do not seek mental health and counseling services to address some of these obstacles, or if they do enter counseling, terminate sessions early. Lack of resources, cultural mistrust, hesitancy to self-disclose to a stranger, (especially if the counselor is White) and lack of choice regarding the preference for a Black counselor vs. a White counselor, are reasons for early termination and the counseling gap. (Lewis & Tucker, 2002; Muller, 2000; Steward, 1993; Thompson, Worthington & Atkinson, 1994).

Most research concerning Black women and coping strategies insists that Black women primarily rely on each other for social support, respect and understanding (Jackson & Sears, 1992; Utsey et. al, 2000). Other coping strategies that have remained a theme in the lives of the Black community (and thus, many Black women's experiences) include relying on religion or spirituality, (Moore & Madison, 2005) and avoidance (Utsey et. al, 2000).

It is no surprise then, that group counseling has been cited as the primary counseling intervention for Black women. Bradley, Sanders & Lipford (2003) suggest group counseling for Black women because: (a) strong social connections and close relationships play a major role in the Black woman's experience, therefore special strengths and resilient behaviors result when Black women participate in Black women support groups and (b) Black women are empowered by a sense of belonging and appreciation of academic, racial and cultural understanding. By participating in group work, Black women can release stereotypes and pressures associated with being a Black woman, and can receive more positive messages about others and or themselves.

Same-race therapy groups for Black clients could lead to a decrease in no-show behavior and premature termination rates. In one study, After offering same-race group therapy for White and Black female college students, Black group members chose to initially focus on societal issues like racism, and past and current challenging obstacles that had been overcome. The study indicated that there was a correlation between the increase in the amount of self-disclosures and the comfort group members experienced because each participant was a Black woman. The group's self-disclosures continued to increase despite participants' differing backgrounds and self-concepts of identity (Steward, 1993).

Further research affirms that culturally specific group work with Black female clients is a useful treatment method when implemented appropriately. Contributions that group therapy

provide include: (a) a less stigmatizing way of seeking help compared to other forms of mental health treatment, (b)consciousness-raising discussion where connectedness is achieved through positive identification, validation, mutual sharing and bonding, acknowledgement and (c) acceptance of the client's unique perspective and experiences and support and empowerment for Black women (Jones & Hodges, 2001).

Bibliotherapy is also consistently recommended as an effective and culturally appropriate exercise to incorporate into group therapy. Bibliotherapy serves as a catalyst in helping members gain the necessary skills to develop a healthy sense in a non-threatening, self-reflective way by examining emotional and less complicated situations individuals address daily. Non-fictional and fictional literature related to race and gender, and authored by Black women is suggested for group work (Jones & Hodges (2001).

While individual counseling approaches for Black women have warranted less attention than group therapy strategies, therapy rooted in womanist theory, along with the "Sista" intervention, and H.E.R.S. model are offered as effective individual counseling approaches for Black women.

The womanist model is a Black feminist model that focuses on counseling Black women who balance multiple identities and maneuver different cultural spaces. Therapy grounded in womanist theory is offered as a more inclusive and more multi-culturally competent approach than therapeutic interventions enriched by Afrocentric theory or more traditional feminist philosophies because the latter approaches typically do not generally address the intersection of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other identity aspects that affect an individual.

Womanist strategies include contextualizing the problem, drawing on a legacy of Black women's involvement in social justice activism, creating networks of support and connection,

community-building ,and empowerment through interpersonal connections as resistances to oppression (Williams, 2005).

Bradley & Sanders (2003) suggest a Sista intervention for Black female clients that have a strong social support system. Clients who possess have positive and healthy social support systems invite close female friends or family members to the following session. The presence of close female friends and families helps reduce the client's initial hesitancy to self-disclose and reduces potential mistrust of the counseling experience and helps the counselor gather and clarify pertinent information about the client's life, strengths, concerns and goals.

The History/Herstory, Empowerment, Rapport and Spirituality (H.E.R.S.) model was developed by Moore & Madison-Colmore (2005) as an alternative consideration to pathology theory, which contends that lower perceived socioeconomic status leads to a lower quality of life experience, and as a different approach to the Structural-Functional model, which suggests that a controlled socioeconomic status for all cultural groups will yield class norms among all groups and thus, a homogenous experience.

The H.E.R.S. model slightly differs from therapy embedded in womanist approach because it includes aspects of Afrocentric theory, but also incorporates integrated-feminist and psychodynamic approaches into its model. By combining the two, the H.E.R.S. model explores variations of racial and gender life experiences, history, societal traditions, and spirituality.

Understanding cultural history, motivating women to change through empowerment, challenging women to build interpersonal skills and incorporating spirituality into a clinical setting are major themes of the H.E.R.S. model.

After extensively reviewing literature concerning multiple identities, varying experiences, coping strategies and best counseling practices that have been associated with Black women,

implementing two or more of the aforementioned approaches in counseling work with Black women could provide a beneficial, culturally sensitive and demystified experience for this population.

“SEE” (Sisters Embracing Empowerment) is a term that refers to the notion of offering these interventions in a collaborative manner, either: (a) incorporating two or more of the interventions into a single session with a Black female client, or (b) employing two or more of the interventions into the client’s plan of work (SEE plan) if the approaches appropriately address the client’s presenting issue(s).

If implemented fittingly, the using these approaches collectively will aid Black female clients to “SEE”—Sisters Embracing Empowerment. Employing the interventions together may allow counselors to create an experience that will lead clients to self-discovery, self-advocacy, appreciation of one’s own worldview, healthy decision-making, more effective goal-setting and an understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships. If clients gain a better sense of the aforementioned concepts, they will be able to empower themselves and their communities.

The following is a case study and “SEE” plan that demonstrates the application of each intervention.

Case Study

Imani is a twenty-six year old Black female who recently graduated with a Master’s Degree in Accounting from Carnegie Mellon University. She was recently hired as a Junior Accountant for a small reputable public relations firm. Initially Imani was excited about her new job. However she is now considering ending her career at the firm due to several experiences concerning race and gender with her coworkers. Imani considers seeking counseling after a member of her singles ministry testifies that she has gained so much insight from her own experience in counseling.

The Initial Session and the Sista Intervention (Bradley & Sanders, 2003)

Counselor: If it makes you more comfortable, I would encourage you to have your friends come to our next You can give them a copy of my disclosure statement. Out of respect for each other, you may want to discuss what each of you are willing and not

willing to share before you come. But I would enjoy meeting your friends and getting to know them as well as getting to know you better.

Using the H.E.R.S. Model (Moore & Madison-Colmore, 2005)

Counselor can use their skills to assess each of the four components of the H.E.R.S. model.

Herstory-Tell me more about your name. Is there a story behind your name?

Empowerment-Working in an environment like the one you described where your voice is rarely heard can be very frustrating. How do you deal with the frustration? Do you have other friends who are going through the same experiences?

Rapport- Demystifying the counseling process and discussing obvious and potential differences is a very appropriate way to introduce rapport into the sessions. For counselors who are not African-American women, discussing observed cultural differences, as well as the potential for cultural mistrust is also an effective way to establish trust during the initial phase of the counseling process.

Spirituality: Think about what your ideal work environment would be. It doesn't have to resemble reality, just think about your dream workplace. Finally, jot down some of your favorite scriptures that uplift you. We can discuss how they motivate you in the future.

Supplementing Individual Sessions with Group Work

Counselor: The other thing I wanted to tell you about is our SEE for Each Other Literary Therapy Group. Do you like to read leisurely? This group currently consists of ten women who meet every week for 90 minutes on Thursdays for 12 weeks. Our discussions are centered around literature, and it's similar to a book club. This month each person is reading a chapter of the book *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. There's one chapter that I think you would really enjoy reading and it's called "Double Duty: Black Women in the World of Work."

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