

The Morning After: Dealing with the Traumatic Effects of Being Black in America

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On Tuesday, we woke up to two viral videos depicting the pervasiveness of white supremacy. The first video was of Amy Cooper, weaponizing her whiteness and privilege as an act of violence towards a Black man because he asked her to put a leash on her dog, the park’s rule. The second video was of the murder of George Floyd. In the video, a police officer is seen with his knee in his neck for several minutes, suffocating him until he is no longer responsive. You can hear George Floyd ask for help, stating that he could not breathe, and even cry out for his mother. Concerned citizens are heard pleading with officers to allow him to breathe and to check his pulse. Later that evening in Minneapolis, unarmed protesters took to the streets to exercise their right to protest and were met with tear gas and rubber bullets. The contrast of the treatment between these protesters and armed white protesters, who are yelling in the face of officers inside the Michigan statehouse, is evidence of white privilege. Continually hearing about these incidents, witnessing injustices across the country, and watching videos of Black people being killed by police officers with no conviction is exhausting, depressing, and frustrating. We are tired!! And I mean T.I.E.D. (Yes, I didn’t use the ‘R’ on purpose).

Watching these videos serve as a constant reminder that these vicious acts could happen to me or someone I love. My degree attainment, checking accounts, Christian values will not matter to some who view my skin color as a threat or a visceral image of criminality. All of this is traumatic and weighs on the consciousness of Black folks. This emotional weight is known as racial battle fatigue and is experienced when people of color are subjected to constant racial

oppression. Researchers define racial battle fatigue as “social-psychological stress responses (e.g., frustration; anger; exhaustion; physical avoidance; psychological or emotional withdrawal; escapism; acceptance of racist attributions; resistance; verbally, nonverbally, or physically fighting back; and coping strategies)” (Smith, Allen, Danley, 2007, p. 552). For some of us, we need time to process and move beyond feeling the pain or numbness before we can re-enter the world. The morning after the awareness of these incidents can be difficult. Going to work the next day is hard. Having to give yourself a pep talk before you exit your vehicle to walk into work takes strength. Being present in meetings is challenging when everything within you wants to withdraw. Hiding out in your office to escape interactions and avoiding putting on a fake smile and small talk. Hoping no one makes an ignorant statement because you lack the mental strength to censor your response to maintain an image of professionalism. These are signs of coping with racial battle fatigue and frankly the desire to call in Black. Calling in Black is a day of self-care and mental wellness to process the trauma. It is giving yourself permission and space to grieve. It allows you to wrestle with the reality that it could be you, your husband, wife, sister, brother, father, mother, aunt, uncle, cousin, son, or daughter.

It is also disheartening to watch white colleagues continue business as usual and not acknowledge the atrocity we witnessed as a country. The silence of our white colleagues/work friends is LOUD. A simple “Hey, how are you feeling?” or “I saw what happened, and I just wanted to check on you,” and then just listen. One of the benefits of working from home during this pandemic is that I did not have to call in Black. I was able to process without bearing the weight of putting on a fake smile to go to work. I participated in zoom calls with the video off. I was able to process with friends who understood how I was feeling and felt the same way. I was able to cry, feel the pain, and be angry. Many of us work for organizations with leadership that

may not understand the necessity of taking a moment to pause and acknowledge that their employees are hurting and carrying a burden from the long history of racial injustice in our country. As a higher education executive whose work is focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, I understand what it is like not to want to go to work the next day and be responsible for being a source of hope for those who are hurting within your sphere of influence. The emotional toll and weight associated with processing these traumatic incidents have a deleterious effect on the bodies and souls of Black folks. Audre Lorde (1988) is often quoted for her powerful statement about self-care, which states, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 130). So, by all means, use that personal day to call in Black. To the white people and non-Black people of color reading this, check on your Black friends and colleagues. We are not ok!

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Lorde, A. (1988). A burst of light and other essays. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

Smith, W.A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L.L. (2007). “Assume the position...You fit the description”: Psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(4), 551-578.