Nurturing the Sexuality of Traumatized Black Women

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I, Tanisha M. Ranger, DO NOT have a financial interest/arrangement or affiliation with one or more organizations that could be perceived as a real or apparent conflict of interest in the context of the subject of this presentation.
Objectives

• Participants will be able to understand the sociohistorical context in which Black female sexuality exists
  • Identify two sociohistorical factors that pertain to Black women’s sexuality

• Participants will be able to recognize the unique needs of Black women who have survived sexual assault, abuse, and/or harassment
  • Recognize two unique needs of Black women who have survived sexual violence

• Participants will be able to identify necessary components of a culturally sensitive, strengths-based course of treatment for Black women survivors of sexual assault, abuse, and/or harassment
  • Specify two components of treatment to empower and help foster resilience in Black women survivors of sexual violence
Black Women in America: A (Very) Brief History

Shyne Coldchain Jr. @Smooth_Orator · 5h
every single stereotype about how white and black women are perceived, in one very simple sentence.

Jawny Mathis. @GeeDee215
CNN pundit saying that Blasey-Ford’s testimony is more resonant bc — unlike Anita Hill who projected strength and poise — Blasey-Ford projected vulnerability. ...
Black Women in America: A (Very) Brief History

- Social Darwinism and the devaluation of Blackness
- Assumptions about Black women’s sexuality
- The familiar archetypes
  - Jezebel
  - Mammy
  - Sapphire
- The Superwoman Complex
The Takeaway:

Black women’s bodies have been viewed as commodities, in existence solely for the pleasures and/or economic gains or others.

Black women have been consistently devalued and denied the opportunity and right to define, create, maintain, and develop our own sexuality.
Let’s Talk About Sexuality

Circles of Sexuality
(based on the original work of Dr. Dennis Dailey)

- Sensuality
- Intimacy
- Sexual identity
- Sexual health & reproduction
- Sexualization
Let’s Talk About Sexuality

Circles of Sexuality

**Sensuality**
Refers to awareness and feelings about your body and that of others. Sensuality enables us to feel good about how our bodies look and feel, and what they can do. It allows us to enjoy the pleasures that our bodies can give us and others.
Let’s Talk About Sexuality

Circles of Sexuality

**Intimacy**
Refers to our ability (and need) to be emotionally close to others, and allow them to be close to us.
Circles of Sexuality

**Sexual identity**
Refers to our development of an understanding of who we are as sexual beings. This includes identifying as male/female/other; discovering who we love and to whom we are attracted; and understanding the roles and rules associated (and whether or not they apply to us)
Circles of Sexuality

Sexual health & reproduction

Refers to attitudes and behaviors related to our sexual and reproductive systems. This includes health and hygiene, the health consequences of sexual behaviors, and the biology of producing children.
Let’s Talk About Sexuality

Circles of Sexuality

Sexualization

Refers to that aspect of sexuality in which people seek to influence, manipulate, or control other people. Sexualization includes behaviors that range from relatively harmless to sadistically violent.
Let’s Talk About Sexuality

Circles of Sexuality – The Takeaway

Consider how sexual assault can negatively impact each of these circles generally.

Given what we know about the ways that Black women’s sexuality is defined and conceptualized, consider what negative aspects are then reinforced.
And Then There’s The Shame

• Guilt vs Shame
• The impact of shame
• The role of Intersectional Oppression
  • Collins: sexism, racism, classism
  • Brown-James: sizeism, textureism, colorism
• Sexual shame in the context of oppression
And Then There’s The Shame

BRIEFS Model for working with Black women to heal sexual shame
(Brown-James, 2018)

- **Beliefs** - consider your beliefs about yourself, the world, and relationships
- **Repercussions** - what are the unwelcome, unintended consequences related to your beliefs
- **Individuals/Institutions** - consider who in your life does or has reinforced the shame and how societal messages have served to reinforce the shame
And Then There’s The Shame

BRIEFS Model for working with Black women to heal sexual shame
(Brown-James, 2018)

• **Explore** – look at the congruencies between the individuals and institutions that have served to cultivate your shame, and what they might value or have to gain from doing so

• **Future Beliefs** – ideally, what would you like to believe instead about yourself, the world, and relationships

• **Steps** – what concrete steps can you take, on a day-to-day basis to affirm your preferred belief
And Then There’s The Shame

BRIEFS Model for working with Black women to heal sexual shame (Brown-James, 2018)

Using this model, each of the five circles of sexuality and address the beliefs you have that lead to feeling shame, the negative impact of those beliefs, where you got them, and what you’d rather believe.
“When it comes to sexual assault in the African American Community, a code of silence and shaming still exists.” (Terrell, 2016)

Some of the facts
• US Dept of Justice estimates that one in five women over the age of 15 will be raped in her lifetime
• A 2014 study found that Black women between the ages of 18-24 are at highest risk for sexual assault
• Black women and girls, especially those living at or below poverty level are far too often targets of sexual violence, usually perpetrated by men in their own communities
• 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey estimated 3.1M Black rape victims and 5.9M Black survivors of other forms of sexual assault in the United States
• For every Black woman who reports a rape, there are 15 more who do not file a complaint
Sexual Assault and Abuse in the Black Community

**Barriers to seeking help**
- Socio-cultural mandate to protect the Black man
  - Frequently pressured to choose racial solidarity over our own well-being

  “I didn’t want him to be another statistic; I actually felt bad for him. And I still haven’t forgiven myself for choosing his freedom over my own.”

- Acceptance of rape myths
  - Attitudes and beliefs about rape that are generally false, but widely and persistently upheld, that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression

  “Black women are sexually loose and therefore cannot be raped.”
Barriers to seeking help

• Degree and type of self-blame
  • Characterological
  • Behavioral

• Mistrust of legal, medical and social services systems
  • Especially if we have previously had negative experiences

• Revictimization
  • Encountering victim blaming attitudes in professionals

• Strong Black Woman
  • Belief that we should be able to handle trauma without any assistance
Wendy Maltz, MSW, a clinical social worker, marriage counselor, and certified sex therapist proposes three phases of healing from sexual trauma:

1. Becoming Aware
2. Making Changes
3. Creating Positive Experiences
Healing from Sexual Trauma

Becoming Aware

This involves acknowledging having been victimized; facing the ongoing impact that the sexual violence has on your life; and making the decision to reclaim your sexuality.
Healing from Sexual Trauma

Making Changes

This involves recognizing and addressing the feelings and beliefs about sex that have been negatively impacted by sexual trauma in order to create new meaning; adjusting your sexual self-concept; recognizing and managing the automatic responses that have resulted from the sexual trauma; and moving towards healthy sexual behaviors.
Creating Positive Experiences

This involves relearning the full spectrum of touch; re-coupling sexual activity and intimacy; and addressing specific sexual problems that may be present.
Useful Treatment Modalities
• Narrative Therapy
• Strengths-based Positive psychology
• Feminist models of therapy
• Experiential Therapies
• Family Systems Therapy

Additional Paths of Recovery
• Social Support
• Spirituality
• Self-defense courses
• Journaling
• Yoga (and other body-based techniques)
The Takeaway:

Regardless of treatment modality and supplemental activities used to help Black women heal from the effects of sexual trauma, it is imperative that the following are addressed:

- The already dysfunctional view of Black women’s sexuality
- The culture of silence surrounding sexual assault in the Black community
- Sexual shame and the superwoman syndrome
- Education about the many facets of sexuality and how they are impacted by sexual assault and abuse


Resource

www.therapyforblackgirls.com
Thank You All!

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