

The Curse of Slavery: The Aftermath of Racial Trauma Towards Black People

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Black people are generally cursed from the roots of slavery. Slavery was a time when African-Americans from ages 1-100 were enslaved and owned by White Americans for over 400 years. Enslaved people were not allowed to read, write, or even have fundamental human rights. If they were caught trying to achieve any of these, they were beaten, killed, or sold. This trauma was enforced on African-Americans for centuries. Black people still suffer physically and mentally from the trauma caused by slavery and racial discrimination, and this is the reason why some black people have a pernicious mindset today, which is harmful to the black community. Trauma can be passed down generationally and genetically; the living generations exemplify that today. Slavery was one of the things that led to depressive symptoms like hopelessness. Enslavement has been found in the psychological thinking of black people. Another critical factor that leads to depressive symptoms would be that black people have a higher rate of negative health issues, and there have been studies that show those outcomes or issues are related to collective trauma and hopelessness in African-Americans, including depressive thoughts and behaviors. Enslaved people also experience PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) daily. Slaves never got treated for this disorder, and this only led to mental illnesses for them and the generations to come (“The Curse of Slavery”). Therefore, a detailed examination of the physical and mental health issues African Americans endured, the PTSD and intergenerational trauma these issues caused, and the overall lack of resolution for this abuse provides a better understanding of the curse of slavery.

Unquestionably, slavery was a time that traumatized every black person. Still, to this day, black people suffer from psychological, social, economic and physical health issues. Numerous studies have given insight into and proof of these issues. According to the *US Census Bureau* and

the *US Department of Labor*, the rate of poverty has gotten increasingly higher in black people than in white people in the past 40 years (“The Curse of Slavery”). The cause of this is due to prejudice to black people when it comes to getting jobs. Black people are most likely to have low-income jobs with limited benefits due to dealing with racial prejudice at work (“The Curse of Slavery”). Since some black people are living in poverty, they cannot afford to treat health issues, which leads to another proven fact that African Americans are more likely to suffer adverse health issues than white people. High blood pressure, heart disease, and prostate cancer are twice as likely to be found in African Americans than in white people (“The Curse of Slavery”). Black people must deal with the stress of racial prejudice or living in poverty to the point they can lean on addictive products like cigarettes to ease the tension, but that only leads to more health issues. When black people cannot treat their health issues, they fall into depression, which can result in more chronic illnesses or suicidal thoughts and behaviors (“The Curse of Slavery”). The root of the general health issues of black people is often not talked about enough because the world is more so focused on prejudice policies rather than the issue that caused it. There is not enough insight into how the past injustices caused these adverse health problems to start or how they affect African Americans.

For example, slavery was an event that caused PTSD and depressive symptoms such as hopelessness and suicide. Slavery was torture to African Americans. First-hand stories from Harriet Jacobs, Hannah Crafts, and Frederick Douglass, or just black writers during that time, all showed evidence of intergenerational trauma for black people. This intergenerational trauma indicates black people with a thing called “self-destruction” or “collective pathology,” which is a prevalent thing in the black community (“The Curse of Slavery”). Intergenerational trauma is when a traumatic experience is transferred from the parents to the child and the children after

that (“Understanding Intergenerational Trauma”). Self-destruction is a behavior that causes harm or suicide to oneself. Self-destruction, being a result of slavery, shows how black people in the past were seen. Masters would always tear their slaves down and would tear down any confidence a slave had. This would also teach slaves to tear down their own family as well. An example of this would be a black mother and her son working in the fields. Back then black sons would be complimented and sold based on their skills in the field and as a mother they want to keep their sons from being taken away from them. In order to protect their sons, mothers would say hurtful and cruel things about them. Primarily tearing her kids down and stripping away their confidence. Fast forward today some black mothers have a mindset that stems from scenarios like that. For instance, a white person can compliment a black child and a black mother finds her way to dismiss the compliment (*Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*). The traumatization from slave masters to black people increased the mental health issues for future generations.

Black parents tearing down their children stems from the taught behaviors learned from their masters. Parents were dealing with the psychological injuries from or during slavery which they passed to the children. How this occurred was due to the fact that slaves never got treated for their mental health and trauma. When it comes to trauma, humans react differently depending on how they experienced the event. Depending on if one was to see the traumatic event, cause the traumatic event, or were the one who was severely traumatized, everyone deals with it differently. There is a common known disorder that people usually get after experiencing trauma which is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). There are criteria that people would have to meet in order to be diagnosed with this order which depends on direct exposure, witnessing in person, or indirect exposure. Slaves had to experience all the forms and criteria of PTSD every day which scientists are able to confirm. PTSD can also be diagnosed if one was to experience

trauma everyday and slaves being traumatized was a daily thing. Criteria such as avoidant/numbing symptoms, intrusive recollections, and hyper-arousal symptoms (Friedman). Avoidance numbing symptoms would be trying to cope with feelings by trying to not feel them at all. Another symptom would be one who likes to pursue different activities and hobbies but is prone to give up on them and no longer find a passion or excitement for it. This is a result of PTSD due to one becoming isolated and withdrawn (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Intrusive recollections are flashbacks, nightmares, memories, and thoughts of trauma (Gillette). Another response to intrusive recollection would be one responding in a flight, fight, or freeze response. Intrusive recollection can potentially re-traumatize one physically, mentally, and emotionally (Gillette). Hyperarousal is another core symptom of PTSD. Hyperarousal would be aggression, increased anxiety, insomnia, and hypervigilance “(Hyperarousal Symptoms in PTSD)”. With there being a bunch of symptoms of PTSD, slaves were likely to experience the majority of them. Now in today’s world there is treatment for mental illnesses like PTSD but back for slaves there was no help for them even after being freed. Another outcome would be “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” a condition that was recognized and referred to by Dr. Joy Degruy. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma due to centuries of slavery and still experiences oppression and institutionalized racism today. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome comes from not resolving the trauma caused by slavery The aftermath of their trauma was never addressed or went away. When it comes to trauma, there is a possibility that trauma can be passed down generationally. With epigenetic research, (the research of how an environment can affect genetics) confirming that the environment slaves were in influenced their genes which caused trauma to pass down (Degruy 252). Slavery never being resolved is due to the belief back then that black slaves were believed to be immune to mental

illnesses because they were black and did not have enough human rights to have health issues. It was more so believed that only wealthy white men had mental illnesses which was false since black people had higher rates of mental illness problems and still do to this day (“Mental Illness in Black Community”).

Today African-American children are starting to have increasing rates of suicide each year. Back in the 1700s, Dr. Benjamin, a medical doctor and philosopher, had written that Black children were dealing with abnormal behaviors and struggling with negritude. Negritude is the desire to be white and this was a disease that spread around due to slaves being interbred. Another disease that slaves had was Drapetomania. Drapetomania was a disease that caused slaves to run away from their plantations to be free. In order to cure these diseases and the mental illnesses of slaves, pro-slavery physicians would recommend whipping and beatings. Mental health facilities were also not the places for struggling black slaves. Black people were treated very cruelly, unfairly, and were accused of crimes they did not commit. They were also forced to sleep outside. After the Civil War, all the slaves that were not treated for their mental health caused an increase of insanity and tuberculosis. Instead of being treated for tuberculosis and insanity, lobotomies were practiced on black people. (“Mental Illness in Black Community”). The health of black people only grew to become worse.

After the Civil War, there was a higher rate of poorer health in black Americans than white Americans. In order to help decrease this rate and help the freedmen, The Freedmen's Bureau was founded in 1865. The Freedmen's Bureau goal was to help provide food, shelter, legal aid, and healthcare in order to improve the health of African-Americans also known as the freedmen (Benjamin). The newly freed people struggled to adapt to American society. There were high rates of tuberculosis, infant mortality, smallpox, severe cases of malnutrition, and

injuries. The point of the Freedmen's Bureau was to decrease those issues but unfortunately that goal wasn't fully reached due to the Bureau not having enough funds, political resistance, and ongoing racism by white people (Benjamin). The Freedmen's Bureau was also something that was recognized by W.E.B Du Bois, an African-American sociologist, and who had also published a book that gave insight into the health disparities between white and black people. During the 1900s, African-Americans were struggling with diseases. These diseases were very high in black people and were killing the black population. The diseases and fatalities that were responsible for the death of black people were consumption, pneumonia, inflammation of the brain and kidneys, heart disease, whooping cough, epilepsy, stillbirths, cholera infantum, and childbirth (Dubois). To add onto that there was cancer, alcoholism, fatty degeneration of the heart and liver, apoplexy, and softening of the brain (Dubois). Most diseases such as pneumonia, infantile marasmus, heart disease, consumption, cholera infantum, and inanition were the diseases that killed the most black people. Each year the diseases would increase in black people and more and more would die. Consumption was a disease that caused 1 out of every 6 black people in Philadelphia to die (Dubois). Five out of every seventh black person would be in the age range between 18 and 28 (Dubois). Once black people started adapting to the economy and benefiting from it, they would get hit with consumption which would eventually lead to their death (Dubois). In 1900 there were a bunch of unnecessary deaths in babies and children due to lack of nourishment and care. In Philadelphia 25 percent of babies had tragically died before the age of one. Out of every 5 people who died in a year, two of those people were children under 5 (Dubois). During this time there was higher rates of death in certain diseases in black people than white people (Dubois). This transitions to how mental health in black people is seen today.

Black people have different ways to express how to deal with mental health. Some black people express their mental health with music, community, religion, spirituality, and family. Black people share similar experiences when it comes to racism, inequity, or discrimination which can all lead to the result of poor mental health. Being mistreated by the color of skin can lead to being traumatized and causes big amounts of stress ("Mental Health in Black Communities"). Having access to treatments and care is also a struggle for black people. Black people are most likely to experience socioeconomic disparities and access to social and economic resources which results in worse mental health issues. 1 in 3 black people are able to get help for their mental health (Mental Health in Black Communities). Another factor is that black people have negative beliefs and attitudes when it comes to mental health. It has been found that 63% of black people see mental health as a personal weakness (Mental Health in Black Communities). Some may fear being discriminated against due to their illness or have a feeling of shame. Another fear is of judgment by others for talking about their mental health. An additional known issue is that black people rather rely on faith than an actual therapist or doctor who can give a medical diagnosis and treatments. People see faith as a way to get a source for strength which can help in a way but should not only be the source for help. An extra thing is that health neglect and bias are a big issue when it comes to treating black people and this makes some mistrust mental health professionals (Mental Health in Black Communities). However mental health professionals are not the only thing black people mistrust.

Black people have to witness racial injustice and trauma be broadcasted on social media/TV which can make mental health worse. Watching videos of racial violence towards a black person can re-traumatize them especially if there was time where one had experienced violence first-hand. Videos that showcase racial violence can trigger hypervigilance.

Hypervigilance is the state of heightened awareness and anxiety (Curtis). This can cause black people to mistrust the system when the system is suppose to protect them (“The Effects of Racial Trauma”). Black people have to live with the fear and thought that any time in life they or someone they love can be targeted by law enforcement for no reason and become a victim with no justice (“The Effects of Racial Trauma”). Systemic racism is still a huge thing today even after the ending of slavery. The racial prejudice, discrimination, and bias takes a toll on a black person’s mental health. Years after slavery was the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment which was a time black men were tricked into thinking they would be treated for syphilis but instead were given medication that killed them. Experiments like this resulted in the ongoing racial trauma in black people today. Seeing an event like this online and worldwide damages a black person (“The Effects of Racial Trauma”). Other factors contribute to the damage of the health of black Americans.

In addition to healthcare disparities causing unequal access and treatment for mental health, there are other factors affecting black Americans today that cause inequities. Inequities such as unemployment, housing discrimination, lack of intergenerational wealth, and education. These things increase stress and anxiety in black Americans. Not being employed can raise anxiety since now people have to worry about the fact that they may not have somewhere to live or something to eat. According to economists at Washington and Lee, The New School, and Duke, stress from losing your job is harder on a black person’s mental health than white people (Akee). The economists had found that even with short-term unemployment, mental distress was higher in black people than white people (Akee). However, when it was long term-employment mental distress was at the same level for both black and white people which is understandable because it is likely that anyone would have a built up stress and anxiety for losing their job

(Akee). What causes the differentiation in race when it comes to mental distress and unemployment is due to the difference in wealth by race. According to research published by the Pew Research Center, white Americans had 10 times the median wealth of black Americans (Akee). Lots of Americans invest and make wealth in homes. White Americans are more likely to own their homes than black Americans. Homeownership in black Americans was found to be at 44% and only increased by 0.4% in the past 10 years while white Americans had a percentage of 72.7% which showcases the huge gap in black-white homeownership in a decade (Cozzi). Systemic racism and bias in housing is another factor as to why the percentage of black homeownership is lower. Systemic racism has caused a struggle in obtaining fair housing opportunities for black people. Back in the 1930s there was a discriminatory practice called redlining created by the federal government. Redlining was when the government told institutions to turn down mortgages to individuals who were looking to buy and own houses in neighborhoods with a higher population of black people or immigrants because the neighborhoods were poor and considered to be hazardous (Emmanuel and Kirchner). 30 years later, the federal government made redlining illegal to deny housing because of one's race and income with the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Even though the law was set in place, there was still instances where black people were still denied mortgages at a higher rate than white people. In 2018, according to authors Emmanuel Martinez and Lauren Kirchner, black applicants were almost 3 times as likely to be denied mortgages than white people in Philadelphia even though both races had similar financial traits. According to a HMDA data analysis in 2019, "black people were 1.8 times more likely to be turned down a mortgage loan than white people (Emmanuel and Kirchner). Black people also have a higher mortgage interest rate than white people even when both races make around the same income. Some black homeowners even have

to pay higher interest rates for mortgages than white homeowners who make less income (Raheem). Usually when one makes more income or has a higher credit score, the interest rate for their mortgage is less which makes it unfair that black homeowners with higher income are paying more for mortgage than a white family with lower income. As a whole, discrimination in housing causes damage to one's health. When people deal with the lack of resources due to an experience of discrimination in the housing markets, this can worsen anxiety or depression and can also have a negative consequence on health (Yang, Chen and Park). Black generations have to suffer due to the lack of resources to build their wealth.

Having wealth is so important when it comes to savings, loans, mortgages, homes, credit cards, emergencies, and other commodities that humans need. When one lacks having wealth, it only leads to more stress added due to not being able to have those needs. Lots of white households have intergenerational wealth but when it comes to black people, the amount of households with intergenerational wealth is lower. Wealth is unequally given out in the United States. Black households only earn a fraction of what white households make in wealth which unfortunately leaves them in a dangerous financial situation. Being in a dangerous financial situation gives black people fewer economic opportunities (Weller and Roberts). Black people struggle to build wealth for themselves and their family due to a system that withholds them from thriving and living the American dream. Black families struggle to get and keep a financial asset that they can pass through generations which leads to a large disparity within racial wealth. When it comes to working in the labor market, black people are more steered to jobs that have lower wages, dangerous or harmful working conditions, and jobs with low benefits and opportunities (Weller and Roberts). Another obstacle is that the financial system gives more access to investment and affordable credit opportunities to white households than black

households. This system causes black households to struggle to invest in the stock market, create funds, and start businesses even though black people have to deal with the burden of loans with higher interest rates. All of this builds up to loads of pressure and stress on a black person especially if they are already struggling. The buildup of stress can also lead to health issues such as cancer. Researchers have found that stress can weaken the body's defenses and make the body more vulnerable to cancer (Dolittle). Chronic stress can also interfere with anoikis, which is a cell death that can kill diseased cells and prevent those cells from spreading. Chronic stress can also increase the speed of developing cancerous tumors due to some growth factors increasing (Heid). Another way stress can increase the risk of cancer is one may rely on unhealthy habits to cope. Habits such as smoking, becoming an alcoholic, unhealthy eating habits, and not being as active as usual anymore. These habits can make one addicted and give them a higher risk of health issues related to cancer. If one already has cancer, stress can progressively make cancer worse or have more cancerous cells spread. Research has been found that one who experiences chronic stress has health issues such as heart disease, digestive issues, high blood pressure and an immune system that is weaker than usual. More research has found that people with chronic stress are more likely to be prone to depression, anxiety, insomnia, ADHD, and migraines. In order to cope with chronic stress, getting help emotionally and socially is recommended which is also known to decrease the levels of diseases, anxiety, depression, and other related health issues. Another way to cope with chronic stress could be getting active physically ("Stress and Cancer"). Finding ways to decrease the risk of cancer for black people is a good step to bettering the health of black Americans.

All together black people have endured generations full of trauma and injustice. Slavery was a start to the many obstacles that happen in the black community. The trauma of slavery

affected the mindset and mental health of black people that has gone unnoticed for decades. Slavery implemented a mindset into black people that their mental health was not nearly as important as a white person suffering with mental health issues. Overtime, the consequences of slavery trickled down through learned traits, reactions, and actions imparted onto their family and then through multiple generations leading to today. Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome exemplifies the harm that was done when one race felt they were superior to another. Ignoring the importance of what slavery has done to an entire race only leads to further issues within the black community regarding their mental health. Due to the mistreatment of mental health back then for blacks, now in today's time black people will most likely not go get the help needed to cure their depression or other mental illnesses. The intergenerational trauma caused by slavery had given the mindset to black people that they are not worth pursuing their dreams and were inferior compared to white people. Another mindset that was implemented into the mind of a black person is that they're health is not worth getting treated. The rate of health issues in the black community is significantly higher in black people than white people or any other race. Another thing is black people are likely to face racial bias when it comes to going to a medical doctor which causes some blacks to mistrust the medical system. Racial bias is another big thing that causes a struggle for black people. Black people are more likely to not have intergenerational wealth for their families or to own a home due to discrimination in the housing market. If black people do own a home, they can sometimes have higher interest rates than a white person who makes less income than them which is unfair.

Addressing these obstacles within the black community can bring more awareness to these issues that can prevent black people from thriving. Educating the younger generations of black children to what has gone on in the past centuries helps them not live in ignorance and

confusion. If black people educate themselves of the issues caused by slavery, they have a better chance at breaking the generational curse caused by slavery. This topic is so important to learn because some black children grow up and may wonder why their families act a certain way or just want to simply know the history of their ancestors and culture. It doesn't even always have to be children, some black people grow up and realize rules or things their parents did shouldn't have been normalized. Once black people educate themselves about the topic of slavery and the trauma that came with slavery, that gives another step into bettering the black community and finding healthier ways to cope with the intergenerational trauma and curse of slavery.

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