

# **Let a Brotha Breathe and Grieve: Promoting Healing among Black Men and Youth Who Are Grieving through Honoring-Based Practices**

**Allen Eugene Lipscomb**

**I**n late May of 2020, George Floyd was killed by police officer Derek Chauvin in the city of Minneapolis as three other police officers watched. The images and videos circulated on major news outlets and social media. Earlier that same month, a video of Ahmaud Arbery's killing was made public, and outrage ensued to arrest the two White men who had killed him in his own neighborhood back in February of 2020. On social media, African American/Black people expressed pain and frustration over the unjust murders of Black men. Both of these deaths, along with countless others throughout the past five to six years, reignited the Black Live Matter movement advocating justice for Black people and a reckoning with the race-based trauma that law enforcement across the country disproportionately imposes on African American/Black bodies and that results in their death. The experience of repeatedly witnessing Black people being murdered in the media has been likened to PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) and even secondary race-related trauma. It is unfortunate that the data confirms what African American/Black people have been saying for years—that law

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enforcement officers are more likely to use excessive force against them than their White counterparts in the United States.

The endless violence adds another layer of trauma and traumatic grief to the lives of African American/Black people. I conducted a study in 2018 after the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark by Sacramento police. In this study, I found that police killings of unarmed Black men have severe psychological and emotional impact on not only Black men but African American/Black people in general in the United States. Thus, helping professionals from all disciplines, including clergy, can no longer ignore the racial injustices in our society being done to Black men and youth. This article utilizes a narrative inquiry of Black men and youth's experiences of grief. It seeks to highlight and honor the unique grief and loss experiences of Black men and youth in America without denying their truth experiences. In addition, the article highlights an honoring-based practice model known as the BRuH approach to therapy (bonding through recognition to promote understanding and healing, or BAT) developed by the author (see the resource list at the end of this article). This is an approach in which helping professionals position themselves to hold space for, assess, and provide services to Black men and youth who are grieving. This article critically explores the experiences of various forms of loss, racialization, and traumatic grief experiences among Black men and youth in the United States.

#### NARRATIVE INQUIRY

I employed narrative inquiry methodology to explore the grief and healing experiences in the words of Black men and youth ( $N = 10$ ) with an age range of 18 to 44. This method of qualitative exploration centers the personal stories of African American/Black men and youth who would otherwise be de-centered, dismissed, or denied of their truth experiences. Narrative inquiry seeks to honor the present-day experiences and stories of individuals in an anti-oppressive and antiracist way. The methodology allows for a rich, descriptive depiction of individuals' experiences and explores the meanings that can be gleaned from their stories. Narrative approach magnifies and uplifts voices that may have otherwise remained silent and ignored. My research unapologetically honors Black men and youth experiencing various forms of loss, including traumatic race-related losses, in order to serve them in a way that is healing. I believe a narrative approach to both the

study and analysis is the best research methodology for such honoring. The stories tell us the meaning the participants' experiences have had in their lives in relation to family and community, contributing to a unique perspective on Black male grief in America. That perspective gives us a broader, more holistic view of their grief and bereavement processes. The Black men and youth in this study were recruited using snowball and purposeful sampling via an electronic survey posted on social media platforms and sent out via email. The inclusion criteria were identification as African American and/or Black men or youth, a minimum age of 18, and experience with any form of loss or race-related traumatic encounters (which are also loss experiences). The following are quotes from the men and youth who graciously shared their grief narratives. They describe losses of mothers and other important people and losses due to racialization. The questions asked were the following: What has your experience been with significant losses in your life? What role did your race and gender play in relation to your loss experiences? What does healing mean to you?

I lost my uncle in an issue regarding gun violence. I was present, as were both of my younger brothers and my grandmother, parents and my entire family. Two men came and shot up the house we were all at. I have slight PTSD, this was 3 years ago almost, however I can't bring myself to go back to his house. I don't like going into LA and especially don't like going into his neighborhood. I get anxious around strangers at night and avoid situations where I find myself out late roaming "the streets" after dark. I am mostly okay now, but I know that I never processed the grief or pain, I bottled up my pain, fear and other emotions. (Abraham, 18 years old)

I think the most trauma I've faced as a black male was losing my mother. I was about 8 years old and at that time you know who your parents are but the concept of them not being around anymore doesn't hit you. . . . It took me a good year to finally realize what I had lost and was never getting her back. I still think about it and her every day and it's not a day that goes by where I'm not hoping for my mom to pop up at any moment. (Malakai, 25 years old)

My mom passed away and it has been really hard for me. I really don't talk about how it makes me feel all the time. But honestly I feel alone at times. I'm getting through it by grinding and staying occupied. (Pharaoh, 21 years old)

Man, I had been dealin' with depression and that stuff. In our community, things like this are brushed off and written as something that isn't real or something that we don't go through as a people. I lost a lot, but I move forward. All that matters is that I'm cool now, God is everything to me. Ya dig? (Deshawn, 18 years old)

Growing up I started off living in the same household with 3 little brothers and my parents. My dad stayed at home because he didn't work, while my mom was at school and work. I remember my mom not being there during the weekdays because she was at school, which made me upset. In 3rd grade I was so upset I attempted to kill myself, which led to the cops having to take me home and calling my mom. Even though she was still here a part of me felt empty when she wasn't around because her energy in the household made me feel comfortable and loved. As time went on my mom and dad separated, so she rented out a place for my father, and my brothers and I stayed in the same household as before. This caused a lot of arguments and choosing of sides of which parent we wanted to live with. All this was hard for me because I never wanted to choose. I only get one mother and father, so I wanted to keep as close to my family as possible. Shortly after, my father left for actual good, which really just crushed me. I had and still hold anger as I don't understand why he left. For the longest I felt unwanted, unloved, and lonely. I began to lash out on my mom and my brothers and my nana. I acted out in school, getting in fights and hanging around people who had a negative influence on me. Overall, I just burned bridges with those who stuck around for me till the very end, and it kills me. I prayed every day that hopefully they forgive me and we can go back to how things used to be. However, too much was said and done to forget. I thought about this all throughout high school and found myself feeling alone again. I didn't feel connected to anybody and felt more of just a waste of space. Suicidal thoughts ran through my head but I didn't have the courage to end my life. All I wanted was my family back and to have that same energy back in the household as once before even though I knew it was impossible. I took my mind off things through sports and spending more time with my brothers. Eventually I would have the strength to try and rebuild the relationship with my mother. Although I may feel our relationship isn't the same, my mom is my mom and she loves me unconditionally. I deal with it by accepting that things can't go back to normal. I work hard for myself so that I can

do better as a father in my lifetime, set an example for my brothers, and repay my mom by showing her all her hard work and effort won't be in vain. (Ezekiel, 35 years old)

When I was 9 years old, my mom got into a bad car accident. A vehicle hit my mom from behind and since then she has had a number of medical problems stemming from the incident. I watched my mom go from a single parent working 2-3 jobs to support us to being disabled and unable to move around too much or even get outta bed. For years she went through depression, and I couldn't comprehend everything that she was going through so I ignored it. Obviously I acknowledged the fact that she was in pain and hurting, but after so many years I forgot how my mom was and only remembered her as how it was after the incident. I became numb to it, and now at the ripe age of 20 I am able to understand a bit more of what she's going thru and I'm working on mending our relationship because from a young age I had to come to grips [with the fact] that my mom might not be here much longer, and I pushed it in my head and began to live like she wouldn't be around as long as I would wish, so I became self-supporting. I am still getting through the mental and emotional aspects of everything, but I'm working on it by trying to have a good relationship from now on. (Rufus, 20 years old)

Grief. Have I experienced grief in my life, and the answer is yes, I expressed a lot of grief from losing young friends to gang violence as a young man and even when I was a young boy. I did not let impact me in a negative way, but it did make me numb to the loss of my family members as a grown man. I never paid attention to the grievance towards my racial background. When it came to employment, I'm pretty sure I did not get a few jobs [because of] my race. I took it as their loss, not mine. I was pulled over a few times, probably because of my race, but I got my stuff in order and I never had to really deal with that issue again. When they realize you're clean, they leave it alone. I thank my father for teaching me that we are all equal and never let anybody look down on you and do not look down upon anybody else. He taught me to stay strong and educate yourself and life will be great, and those words are true today. (Abe, 22 years old)

The loss of my beloved mother Daisy was a very traumatic time. She transitioned from earth to heaven December 1996. She was my support, my cheerleader and my rock. My belief in life after physical death was paramount in me getting through the tremendous loss. I know without a shad-

ow of doubt that to be absent from the body is to be immediately present with lord Jesus. This is extremely comforting to me, knowing I will see my mother again after I too transition from the earth realm to heaven. (Jedidiah, 34 years old)

So, at a young age, I went through racial profiling. I'm not too sure if I could say it is race based, but due to the circumstances I feel like I was being falsely accused. Charges had been pressed on me for sexual harassment. A [white] female had accused me of reaching in her shirt and touching her breast. Now at the age I was at [then] I wasn't too worried about females or sexual activity, I was more concerned with games, sports, and my image. . . [When I was] in the 7th grade, sex or any fascination of the idea of a woman had crossed my mind but never did I display the act of wanting to do it in reality. . . . All of those people reported to the office and reported the same exact thing I said I did [except for] one person. That one person was her best friend, and they used that against me. I was 13, sitting in juvenile hall with no real criminal record. The school had placed a deal if you will that we couldn't be in the same class nor within 6 feet within each other, because I was viewed as a predator. But one day she was my teacher's assistant in the 8th grade and tried to come to closure with me. She said out of her own mouth that she was sorry for lying and doing what she did to me. Till this day . . . it doesn't help the fact that it's still on my record and it definitely doesn't help with the fact that I had to sit in a cell for 3 months because of something I didn't do. Privilege is real, definitely white privilege, I just happened to be a witness to it at a young age. (West, 23 years old)

I'm one of the maybe 4 black people in my high school graduating class of 400, and they are deleting my posts off the alumni site. I guess my experiences don't count. I guess they would rather I stayed in LA and never came to their community. However, I've met some incredible people who have blessed my life. I will not be suppressed or silenced to please a few intolerant people. You find out just how much a black life matters to people when they feel empowered. They have made it clear that they are not interested in my life experience. They want me to ignore my experience so they can feel comfortable. I cannot pretend that there is equity in this country because there is not. I have endured through poverty, bigotry, discrimination, and still I rise. I have overcome many obstacles and I will continue to press towards the mark. My first night in [the City of] Appleton was so quiet I couldn't sleep. There were no police helicopters flying low overhead shining their light through the window; no ambulance or police sirens loudly flashing by; no people arguing; no gunshots; just silence. I began to wonder how I was even able to concentrate in

school [in LA] with so many distractions. Every day riding the public bus to school, avoiding the gang bangers, crack addicts, strawberries, and bullies. I had all A's and one B on every report card, that is until my 9th-grade year. I was already accepted to the A Better Chance program for the second time, but my grades had declined. I had racially insensitive teachers and principals who failed me in two of my classes. After having perfect attendance for all of middle school and a 3.8 GPA, I fell sick with pneumonia in my last semester and nearly died, all because I wouldn't stop going to school even though I was sick. I joined this honors program that was so rigorous that I had never been challenged like that before. I was struggling to keep up and no one was there to help me. I was 12 that first semester. Turned 13 over winter break, and then that is when it [the loss] happened. I lost so much time at school, and they were not understanding at all. My counselor was from my neighborhood, she understood what I was going through, but they wouldn't listen to her either. This time I was ready to leave. You see, the first time I was accepted to the program, the Thatcher School in Ojai, CA, wanted me to attend for 9th grade. At 11 years old, I just wasn't really ready to leave my family to go to boarding school and I didn't understand how renowned the school was and how it could change my circle of influence. I was put in a position to make hard choices at a young age, just to survive. I came to Appleton not knowing what was in store for me, not knowing anyone, but I had to try at a chance to have a better life than the one I was born into. My senior year in high school I read the autobiography of Malcolm X, and it changed my life forever. He was not the menace that the press made him out to be. He cared about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which the country of his birth didn't allow him to have. I began to understand that there were stories of the past I was told that was passed off as history and then there was the truth. I began to think, how was slavery around for over 200 years, but my history book in 11th grade only had two paragraphs about it. Something was not right. There are many lessons I learned from being in Appleton that I will cherish forever. My time there and the people I've met have helped shape me into the man I am today. I will not give up on a community that helped me in my time of need. I am here for you now in your time of need for understanding in such a time as this. The world is changing and I will be there to assist with the transition. (Charles, 44 years old)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above narratives, I suggest ten questions to ask Black men and youth who have experienced various forms of loss, including traumatic race-related loss, in order to assess their grief experiences. These questions are taken from the BRuH Approach to Therapy (BAT) and other related resources that I created. This approach utilizes an anti-oppressive and anti-racist approach to honor individuals' experiences and truly allow them to lead the direction of the services provided to them. It is through authenticity, attentive listening, and true bonding that the helping professional accomplishes healing when providing services.

*Ten Questions to Ask When Assessing Black Male Grief Reactions to Loss and Trauma Utilizing the BAT*

1. How would you describe your reaction/response to the loss or event?
2. Describe your experiences with race-related encounters in the community or surrounding area.
3. Who would you identify as your support?
4. Who can you go to for emotional support?
5. Where do you get strength?
6. What are your religious and/or spiritual beliefs related to loss, death, and dying?
7. Describe your experience with intimate sexual relationships following the loss.
8. What are your thoughts about your own life and death as it relates to your experiences of loss and trauma?
9. What are some things that are important for me to know when working with you?
10. What are your thoughts about working and/or talking with me about your loss and trauma experiences?

Utilizing the BAT model requires increased awareness of your own discomfort-related reactions and how to manage those yourself without letting them impact others (i.e., the Black men and youth you are working with). Sometimes to truly listen and honor their grief experiences may mean keeping quiet and holding the space; having the skills to name and effectively claim your social location, privilege, and power; and practicing

a person-centered relational approach (centering). Let the process unfold at its own pace when assessing and serving Black men and youth who are grieving. It is vital that you as the helping professional create the space, set the intention, be consistent, and be there for them by honoring their truth. It is also important to acknowledge your own power and privilege related to your race, gender, position, and title as well as the power and privilege of the institution that you represent. Helping professionals must set an intention that they will continue actively engaging in antiracist practices (i.e., practices that will not pathologize, racialize, demonize, criminalize, colonize, or Westernize others' truth experiences) and that they will challenge or criticize the stories told to them by Black men and youth. Holding the space for uninterrupted processing and approaching Black men and youth with humility in terms of their identity and their lived experiences are key in honoring them. You must be able to manage your own reactivity and emotions and be willing to be authentically who you are while acknowledging that some aspect of your identity could be a barrier to establishing trust.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude with this poem that I wrote in 2018 after a young Black man died at the hands of law enforcement. I was asked to read it at his memorial service.

## Who Will Advocate for the Black Male

Who will listen to the black male who often goes unheard?

Who will advocate for the black male who often goes unseen?

Who will advocate for the black male  
who's been feared, ignored and disposed?

Who will advocate for the black male  
whose swag, triumph and intellect is pristine?

Who will advocate for the black male? Hands up! But I can't breathe!

Who will advocate for the black male—don't shoot! It's me . . .

Who will advocate for the black male  
whose blood bleeds but goes unseen?

Who will advocate for the black male  
whose grind and grit gets him a degree?

Who will advocate for the black male who lays confined in the cell?

Who will advocate for the black male whose death leaves loved ones  
with unanswered questions?

Who will advocate for the black male  
whose psychological burden is not shared by others?

Who will advocate for the black male if we are not believed to be free?

Who will advocate for the black male who dies, who tries to please?

Who will advocate for the black male—we must all do our deed.

## RESOURCES

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