

# Devaluation, Loss, and Rage: A Postscript to Urban African American Youth with Substance Abuse

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*This paper explores and discusses the socio-cultural dynamics underpinning urban African American youth's use and misuse of substances and its connection to the invisible wounds of race related trauma. A racially-sensitive framework will be discussed as an intervention approach designed to address the special needs of urban African American adolescents maligned by, and suffering from, the complex interplay of substance misuse and rage.*

**KEYWORDS** *African-American, youth, rage, substance abuse, race*

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## Defining Substance Abuse

Substance abuse can be defined as a “pattern of harmful use of any substance for mood-altering purposes.” Medline's medical encyclopedia defines drug abuse as "the use of illicit drugs or the abuse of prescription or over-the-counter drugs for purposes other than those for which they are indicated or in a manner or in quantities other than directed." *Substance abuse*, as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revision (DSM-IV-TR)* (APA, 2000), is a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress as manifested in a 12-month period by at least one of four criteria: (1) recurrent substance use resulting in failure to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or home (e.g., poor performance at school or work, neglect of children or younger siblings); (2) recurrent substance use in hazardous situations (e.g., driving while intoxicated); (3) recurrent substance-related legal problems (e.g., DUIs); and (4) continued substance use despite having recurrent interpersonal problems related to substance use (e.g., arguments with family members about consequences of intoxication). For the purposes of this manuscript, we use the DSM-IV-TR definition of substance abuse as our organizing framework.

African American youth use and abuse substances for many of the same reasons that would be true of the general population: a) as a source of recreation and socializing; b) glorification of drugs in some aspects of the youth subculture; c) family of origin exposure and influences; and d) to anesthetize emotional and psychological pain. We focus almost exclusively on African American youth's use and abuse of substances as a pathway to

*anesthetizing emotional and psychological pain.* We believe this issue has far greater salience for African American youth, than it does for many other youth, due to the emotional and psychological pain that the former experiences as a result of the burdens of race and racial oppression. Thus, understanding the socio-cultural forces that fuel much of the acting out, self-destructive behaviors of urban African American adolescents is critical for professionals working with this population. Whether addressing youth violence or the abuse of substances, a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between devaluation, dehumanized loss, and rage must be examined. We maintain that the everyday life experience of urban African American youth is mired with circumstances that predispose them to paralyzing levels of devaluation, dehumanized loss, and rage.

### The Process of Devaluation

Hardy and Laszloffy (2005) describe devaluation as “a process by which an individual or group is stripped of the essentials of their humanity.” In short devaluation contributes to the wholesale decay of one’s sense of dignity. It assaults the core of one’s being in a way that highlights the significance of one’s insignificance and worthlessness. Devaluation is central to the essentials of one’s humanity because it is integral to dignity and respect. While many African American adolescents might remain mute on the concept of devaluation, they are often very vociferous in their demand for respect and their desire to not be ‘dissed.’ The unending quest for respect is their way of talking about devaluation. One of the prevailing pledges of many contemporary African American youth is their unshakable belief that ‘death is preferable to disrespect.’ “I rather die than be dissed” is a familiar refrain and choice that is self-

destructively exercised among many urban African American adolescents. Understandably, for those who are devalued, (and not just African Americans) some form of 'death' will almost always be preferable to living and/or enduring... a life of disrespect. So whether it is random acts of violence or random, indiscriminant use of drugs that allows one to garner respect: the end justifies the means. This is one of many reasons why it so difficult to discourage drug use among disaffected youth in general and African American youth in particular. The desire or need for respect as a counteracting force to devaluation is so great that many youth will take actions to acquire it by any necessary means. Devaluation and its residual effects are powerful life forces in the lives of urban African American youth and constitute a major aggravating factor associated with the misuse of substances. There are two principle ways in which devaluation is often inextricably linked to substance use and abuse: 1) it offers a momentary shift in how one sees one's self, i.e, from worthless to worthy; and 2) the usage elicits the support and inclusion from one's peers which conveys "a spirit of acceptance." Thus, the use and misuse of substances afford many urban African American youth a strategy, albeit a self-destructive one, for counteracting devaluation. In a sense this represents yet another iteration of 'death before dis.'

As Hardy and Laszloffy (2005) have indicated, devaluation can be a result of situational and/or societal forces. The situational forces that contribute to devaluation are largely comprised of those experiences or circumstances that are unique to a given individual. They tend to happen by chance and are not necessarily systematic or targeted towards a specific group. Societal forces, on the other hand, are less idiosyncratic and tend to be pervasive, systematic, and do in fact target groups of people. As implied by the reference, societal forces

are both embedded in and supported by the conscious and unconscious deeds and misdeeds of the broader society. In this regard, devaluation is connected to any experience that assaults one's sense of self and dignity, which of course would include race, among a host of other issues, but would not be limited to it.

### Situational Forces

Children who are maligned by the trauma of abuse, neglect, or abandonment often experience devaluation as a major invisible wound that often goes undetected. These manifestations of devaluation are situational and idiosyncratic.... they can affect any child regardless of socio-cultural circumstance and as such, they have absolutely nothing to do with race or any other socio-cultural factor. In fact, any person---not just a child---could experience abandonment, abuse, or neglect. Thus, devaluation that is the result of abandonment, abuse, domestic violence and so forth is situational. The impact can vary from child to child within the same family or from family to family. Thus, it is possible to have two children grow up in the same family or in the same neighborhood and have differential exposure to forces of devaluation, and as a result, be differentially affected by it. For instance, the first born child growing up in a family experiencing extreme exposure to domestic violence will be more affected by devaluation than her younger sibling whose formative days of growing up in the family occurred during a more harmonious and less contentious period. Although both children actually grow up in the same biological family, the impact of devaluation on the two would be substantially different because their family "situations" were significantly different. This helps to explain why two youth who are seemingly exposed to the same challenges might have two

fundamentally different responses to their life circumstances. One becomes addicted to drugs and trapped in a vicious cycle of despair and infractions with the law, while the other becomes a high achiever and excels academically. These are two youth who come from the same family, same neighborhood, with differential exposure to devaluation as well as differential access to strategies for counteracting it. Their similarities are compelling while their differences are significant. Perhaps a more nuanced examination of devaluation and its antecedents might provide critical pieces of missing data in helping to explain why some youth from similar backgrounds and circumstances can ultimately 'choose' such divergent paths.

### Societal Forces

Just as the roots of devaluation can be firmly lodged within the psychosocial interior of the family, they can also be intricately integrated into the fabric of society as well. In United States culture, there are some groups that are more valued than others based on their social location within the broader society at large. Race, class, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity comprise an illustrative list of factors that dictate the relative value that is affixed to a given group in society. For instance, it is our assertion that in the United States it is considered more valuable to be white, male, heterosexual, Christian, able bodied, and a citizen than it is not to occupy any of these statuses. Consequently, some individuals have membership in groups that are devalued and as a result, they are de facto, devalued themselves. While this is the case for many groups, including those we referenced earlier, it is our intention, for the purposes of this article, to focus exclusively on African American youth as a devalued group. In many respects, being an African American youth is inextricably connected with (societal)

devaluation and the persistent emotional and psychological pain associated with the experience. As we noted earlier, much of the high risk, self-destructive, acting out behavior exhibited by many Urban African American youth such as the misuse of substances is rooted in deeply wounding experiences with devaluation for which viable remedies have not been executed.

### African American Youth: Anesthetizing the Emotional and Psychological Pain of Devaluation

African American youth are subject to the same variety of emotional and psychological stressors as would be true for most contemporary youth (e.g. situational forces of devaluation). African American youth are, by no means, immune to the myriad of family difficulties that many young people must inevitably confront: divorce, parental and sibling conflict, illness, death, school performance difficulties, failure associated with personal accomplishments, etc. Despite the obvious commonality that many African American youth invariably share with their fellow youth counterparts, there are also some notable and striking differences. For example, one major difference that separates the growing pains of African American youth from their white counterparts in particular is the matter of race and the necessity of coping with racial oppression and devaluation. Although our society has made significant strides towards achieving racial justice and equality during the past several decades, race remains a powerful organizing principle for all of us, and especially for those whose lives are subjugated on the basis of it. Nowhere is this phenomenon more poignant than it is with regards to African American youth. Many African American youth, regardless of class or gender, have to navigate and master the normal lifecycle developmental crises associated with adolescence and young

adulthood, while also having to wrestle with the realities of what it means to grow up black in a society that denigrates it while claiming, simultaneously and vehemently, not to see race. African American children learn very early in life a familiar jingle that has permeated African American culture for generations and serves as a metaphor for their lives: *“if you are white you’re all right, if you are brown, stick around, but if you are black, step back.”* Many youth of color and black youth in particular therefore must find ways to balance the chasm that often exists between how they see themselves and how they are (negatively) perceived within the context of the broader society. Even African American youth who grow up in families where their racial identity is affirmed, inevitably find themselves struggling with the pains and pangs of racial slights, micro-aggressions, and devaluing preconceived notions about who they are and what they ought to be, based on rigid, mostly negative, racial stereotypes.

Many black youth discover at the very tender ages of childhood—long before the onset of adolescence--- that the world that is defined for them is an incredibly restrictive one where they enjoy little latitude to openly explore their environment in the ways that their white counterparts are not only afforded, but are able to even take for granted. African American youth understand the unspoken rules of racial oppression and devaluation in our society that often lead some to interpret groups of African Americans young people as “gangs”, “mobs”, or some other pejorative racially laced term while a group of congregating white youth are often considered: ‘just a group.’ In many societal circles, white youth often enjoy the *benefits of doubt* while such courtesies rarely exist for African American youth who are often presumed to be criminals, suspects, or the ultimate menaces to society.



Many of the aforementioned conditions that we describe occur seamlessly throughout the everyday life experiences of many African American youth and their families. They are so integral to the experiences of urban African American youth that they are relatively easy for the naïve and unsuspecting onlooker to overlook. Because race and racial oppression remain so incredibly difficult to acknowledge and discuss in our society, there is neither recognition of, nor a language to adequately describe the deleterious effects of these socio-cultural phenomena. The assumption that all children are essentially the same, and that they traverse the lifecycle in very similar and somewhat predictable ways is a notion that is inaccurate and regrettably replete throughout the literature.

Unfortunately, very little attention is devoted to examining how racial or class oppression might alter the socialization process for families of color or the poor. Both African American and poor youth, particularly those from urban locations, are often considered “morally bankrupt kids who are descendants of dysfunctional families.” Too often our analysis fall short of inquires related to exploring the *“what happened”* (to these children and families) types of questions out of deference to an over focus on inquiries designed to determine *“what is wrong”* (with these children and families). Questions related to the former leads us to think broadly and contextually. Questions that focus on *what happened* invariably draw attention to environmental forces, systemic and intergenerational trauma, and cultural considerations. *What is wrong* questions direct us to think more narrowly and to search for individual pathology and dysfunction. *The what happened* to many African American youth is that they have been targets of societal devaluation and consequently suffer from an unacknowledged, unnamed condition, which is analogous to a cancer. It is a major source of pain that underpins

much of their acting out behaviors and reliance on urban pain killers: weed, 'forties', and crack cocaine. Whether it is the proliferation of youth violence and/or substance abuse, these phenomena frequently mask the underlying levels of pain and vulnerability that many African American youth experience in their daily lives. Because the acting out behavior masks the underlying pain, the standard protocol for responding to troubled African American youth is either punishment or more punishment. In some cases, substance abuse treatment may be recommended but it is often done so without an accompanying comprehensive and holistic mental health component that addresses and integrates issues of underlying trauma associated with emotional, psychological, and socio-cultural stressors.

Much of what we have described here is a byproduct of devaluation and the pervasive ways in which it etches an indelible mark on the souls, family systems, and psyches of African American youth and their families. In a sense, the hallmark of devaluation is loss---especially the loss of dignity and respect. For too many African American youth, living with loss has reached epidemic proportions. Unfortunately, when repeated and pervasive loss is neither properly acknowledged nor mourned, it invariably contributes to the dehumanization of loss which is a chronic condition which exacerbates devaluation and increases high risks behaviors.

### Dehumanized Loss

For many urban African American youth, loss is paramount among the emotional and psychological pains desperately in need of anesthetizing. Beneath the mask of invincibility that many urban African American youth wear so fervently to disguise the wounds of devaluation, is a deep seated and unresolved angst associated with loss. When one's life is beset with

devaluation, all aspects of one's existence are de facto devalued, even something as debilitating as loss. Thus the myriad of losses that many urban African American youth sustain from societal-induced devaluation are for the most part unnoticed, and un-mourned. Many of these losses are associated with issues that we highlighted earlier: *the loss of dignity and respect; the loss of innocence and the benefit of the doubt; the loss of freedom and mobility; and ultimately the loss of value*. These losses occur in addition to the ones that an African American youth might experience idiosyncratically within one's family of origin, as a result of a separation, divorce, abandonment, or death.

*Loss of Dignity and Respect*---The loss of dignity and respect is the byproduct of the demonization and vilification of black-ness, African-ness, and non-whiteness. African American youth are besieged with so many negative messages about who and what they are that one's sense of dignity is severely compromised. Whether in the classroom or the courtroom, African American youth are often singled out and highlighted when they should be 'invisible' (e.g. while driving, shopping, riding subways, etc.), and made invisible in circumstances where they should be quite visible (in the job market or retail stores where they are often overlooked by cashiers). These frequent and consistent life experiences of urban African American youth have the same underlying theme of unworthiness, dislike, distrust, and overall "not being good enough." These messages of degradation and disrespect only lead to self-hatred. Once an individual begins to feel unworthy and unimportant, they began to engage in self-destructive behaviors, such as substance abuse, self-injury or even suicidal gestures (most severe). We believe for any youth "acceptance" is the ultimate goal and for African American youth, this acceptance is never truly reached. The struggle to being accepted is almost endless, as their life experiences mainly

revolve around being rejected (in society as a whole). Ultimately, this rejection leads to self-sabotaging behaviors like abusing drugs and alcohol, or even unprotected sex.

*Loss of innocence and the benefit of doubt*---The realities of race and racial oppression coerce many urban African American youth to grow up quickly and to see the cynical side of the world perhaps before they are ready to do so. It is increasingly difficult for many African American youth to see and believe in the goodness of the world when they seldom witness or experience it personally (from the world at large). Whether it is the presence of community violence and the over-exposure to the loss of human life or the slow response time of the police and Emergency Medical Services to requests for intervention in ‘the hood’---the results are the same, a loss of innocence about the world. Many African American youth also lose their innocence in the eyes of others as well which deprives the former of the benefit of doubt. It is commonplace for African American youth who do bad things to be quickly labeled as “bad kids” or “thugs” with a criminal streak while their white counterparts, who do similar bad things, are often given the benefit of the doubt and considered kids suffering from mental health issues. These subtle but significant differences epitomize the loss of innocence and the benefit of doubt.

*The Loss of Freedom and Mobility*---African American parents and other parents of color are the only parents we have worked with who raise their children with an ever present consciousness of the police. African American and other children of color are socialized to manage their behavior based on how it might appear to the Police. As a response to racial oppression and devaluation, many African American youth are socialized to suppress their

sense of curiosity and exploration for fear of being considered a threat, suspicious, or criminal. Countless number of African American youth live (some portion of) their lives within the bounds of a wall-less prison where restricted mobility and 'flying under the radar' are highly sanctioned activities believed to be positively correlated with survival.

*The Loss of Value*---When inundated with the gravity and complexity of losses that many urban African American youth are confronted with, the loss in the belief of one's worth is inevitable. It is very difficult to be a major stockholder in the belief of one's self-worth when there are so many counter-messages that are well integrated in our society that devalue. As a result of all of these losses, for many African American youth, loss loses its humanness. Consequently, loss becomes dehumanized which is often the precursor to rage as well as an underlying, unacknowledged pain that often requires medication, particularly in the form of a forty-ounce malt liquor, a joint, or a hit of crack cocaine.

When loss loses its humanness, any and all things become possible. In the midst of dehumanized loss, it is relatively easy to suspend all fears, especially those that have consequences regarding matters of life and death. Violence towards others and self is much easier to transact because there is an overall lack of regard for one's own value as well as the value of others. Substance abuse is not only soothingly medicating but it also allows for some flirtation with an underlying and unconscious death wish.... or at the very least, a sense of resignation of about the potential (un)timeliness of one's inevitable death. From the perspective of the urban African American substance abusing youth, whatever loss or losses that might occur as a consequence of substance abuse will simply be stacked up against the pile

of losses that have already accrued over time for which no one seemed to care. There is a predictable element of recklessness that accompanies dehumanized loss that is magnified with the abuse of substances. Those who are maligned by the synergistic interplay of devaluation, dehumanized loss, and substance abuse present a very perplexing public presentation. On the surface, they seem to 'care nothing about nothing' while they suffer beneath the surface with dehumanized loss and rage.

### Rage

Rage is the culmination of pervasive, chronic, and recurring experiences with devaluation and the dehumanization of loss without the benefit of redress. It is directly and poignantly linked to experiences with degradation, marginalization, and devaluation. It is a deeply rooted emotional reaction to a perceived injustice and differs from anger, which is a much more immediate and episodic emotion. Rage, on the other hand, develops gradually over a protracted period of time and can either be experienced quietly without overt expression or experienced overtly and unpredictably precipitous in its expression. The complexity of rage is such that neither of these expressions is mutually exclusive, which makes it hard to detect and comprehend. It is multidirectional in its expression.

#### Internalization and Externalization of Rage

The multi-directionality of rage is such that it can either be directed towards oneself (internalized) or towards other (externalized). It can be directed exclusively towards oneself, towards another (others), or both. The epidemic of youth violence that plagues the country and particularly among urban inner city youth is a powerful illustration of rage externally expressed

towards others. Although the designated targets of the rage are so-called “others”, this is often quite deceptive because of the presence of devaluation and the sense of self-loathing that often accompanies it. For instance, African American youth killing other African American youth is an excellent example of rage directed towards one’s symbolic self which is directly linked to devaluation. Substance abuse, on the other hand, which could be construed as an act of violence, is an illustration of internalized rage directed towards one’s literal self. We believe understanding and addressing rage is a key to element to working effectively with substance abusing urban African American youth.

### Functional and Dysfunctional Features

Rage is simultaneously functional and dysfunctional (Hardy and Laszloffy, 2005). On the one hand, it can be a potent energy source that can be inspirational, and a source of creativity and productivity when properly guided. However, on the other hand, it can also be a strong destructive force when it is void of a societal sanctioned vehicle. When rage is free floating and disconnected from its origins, it tends to spiral out of control and can be quite harmful. For many substance abusing urban African American youth, there has been a failure to integrate and (re) channel rage into socially sanctioned conduits. For these youth, their efforts to manage rage drive them to self-defeating and self-destructive misuses of substances, that over time only serve to help intensify rage. This recursive pattern is further complicated by the role that loss and devaluation plays in the dynamic. Although rage is the dominant driving emotion, it is inextricably tied to devaluation and dehumanized loss. None of these conditions exists without the other.

## Intervention

Largely due to the dynamics of race and racial oppression, urban African American youth's abuse of substances is complexly intertwined with devaluation, dehumanized loss, and rage. Strategies for working with African American youth must move beyond fragmented services that often malign effective intervention. Intervention models that advocate the *punishment approach and/or the segregated substance abuse treatment approach* must be reconsidered. The punishment approach focuses solely on the youth's anti-social/criminal behavior that often accompanies substance abuse, while under-emphasizing the significance of detoxification or other forms of substance abuse intervention. The segregated substance abuse approach, on the other hand, often targets the use and misuse of substances with sobriety as its singular goal, while devoting only scant attention, if any, to mental health related issues. While both of these approaches are extraordinarily invaluable to the well-being of substance abusing African American youth, a more integrated, broadly systemic approach is sorely needed.

Since many of the issues that contribute to the abuse of substances are often systemic, we believe systemically-oriented solutions are crucial. Thus, neither mental health services without deliberate attention to addictions nor substance abuse treatment without a concentrated focus on underlying mental health issues would be broad enough in scope to provide the type of integrated care needed by many urban African American substance abusing youth.

In addition to substance abuse intervention, whether a Twelve Step Program or Alcohol Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous, dual interventions, such as Mental Illness and Chemical Addiction (MICA) Program, or even other behavioral approaches, such as Cognitive Behavioral



Therapy, or some other approach, a racially sensitive mental health approach that focuses on devaluation, dehumanized loss, and rage must be integrated into the intervention model. The objective of the mental health component would be to accomplish the three following integrated goals: a) to promote the counteraction of devaluation; b) Re-humanize loss; and c) Promote the Rechanneling of Rage while remaining acutely cognizant of how race and racial oppression are inextricably connected to these issues. Such an approach would enable urban African American youth to explore and understand the ways in which their abuse of substances and the everyday realities of race and racial oppression they experience are so intricately intertwined.

#### Counteracting Devaluation

As noted earlier, devaluation is a common occurrence for urban African American youth, thus any efforts to address it must be willful, persistent, and deliberate. Due to the dynamics of race and racial oppression, it is a natural position of default for many African American youth. Their life narrative is one that centers on the importance of being respected and thwarting any opportunity to 'be dissed' no matter the cost. They don't talk about "devaluation" as such, and many would be hard pressed to explain the origins of it. While devaluation *happens to urban* African American youth fairly consistently, many have little more than a cursory understanding of how and why it works. They just know that the opportunities for disrespect are many and when it occurs it is worse than death. Therefore, employing effective strategies for counteracting devaluation is a critical component of working with urban African American

youth with substance abuse issues. The “*Dis Discourse*” and a strengths-based tool, *the VCR Model*, are two principle methods used for counteracting devaluation.

### The ‘Dis Discourse’

The ‘Dis Discourse’ is a semi-structured exercise designed to facilitate urban African American youth’s conversations about their all-consuming concern with “respect.” It is comprised of a series of recommended questions that are designed to promote exploration, conversations, and ultimately a deeper understanding of devaluation and how to counteract its effects. It affords youth the opportunity to talk openly about their numerous experiences with the assault of disrespect. The following is a sample of the type of questions that would be integral to conducting a Dis Discourse: 1) “Can you tell me about a time when someone in your school **tried** (emphasis added) to diss you?”; 2) “Can you tell me about a time or a story about when someone tried to diss you because of your race?” Use of the word “tried” is critical because it implies that the “perpetrator” was unsuccessful, and that the youth in question was able to gain respect by thwarting the attempted effort to be disrespected. Following the lead of the youth, the therapist/facilitator conducting the Dis Discourse may ask a number of critical follow-up questions to expand the conversation as it progresses. During this process it is imperative that the therapist/facilitator refrains from exercising any judgment regarding whether a particular act or action was in fact an attempt to disrespect. It is incumbent upon the therapist/facilitator to validate the experiences and perceptions of the youth, not challenge, analyze, interpret, or dispute. A well-executed Dis Discourse also makes it possible for youth to explore, identify, and discuss the types of actions, deeds, and misdeeds that they

routinely, directly or indirectly, engage in to acquire respect. This aspect of the Dis Discourse expands the scope of the process by conducting a thorough examination of what a given youth does to gain respect. More often than not, the use of substances—lots of substances---and demonstrating the ability to “handle them all” are usually perceived as behaviors that earn respect.

The Dis Discourse can be very illuminating experience for urban African American youth because it makes *the implicit significance* of these issues *explicit* by engaging youth in a direct conversation about them. It invites youth to explore the numerous times that they have been confronted with situations that were attempts to “diss” them and it makes it possible to explore strategies for counteracting the insidious effects of devaluation.

#### The VCR Approach

The VCR approach (Hardy and Laszloffy, 2005) is a strengths-based tool that is specifically designed to counteract devaluation. It is based on the notion that every human being has a redeemable part if we look for it...including substance abusing urban African American youth! The Approach asserts that when interacting with youth who have a protracted history with devaluation, such as the population in question, it is vital to acknowledge and validate their strengths (redeemable parts).

There are three important components of the VCR approach: **Validate (V)**; **Challenge (C)**; and **Request (R)**. When working with urban African American substance abusing youth, validating comments should significantly outweigh message and actions that confront, challenge, or criticize. The VCR approach is designed to assist those who work with substance

abusing African American youth to change what they look for in order that they can change what they see. The focus on validation is geared to expose the pearls of strength and functionality that are frequently embedded in the web of dysfunctional behavior that is often believed to be endemic to many African American youth using and abusing substances. One of the ultimate goals of the VCR is to highlight for devalued youth that they do in fact have value and redeemable parts that are not predicated on their adherence to a myriad of self-destructive behaviors designed to gain (pseudo) respect, which includes substance use and abuse.

### Re-humanizing Loss

When loss loses its humanness, any and all things, no matter how heinous or destructive, become possible. It is dehumanized loss that contributes to hopelessness, helplessness, and despair. These same experiences are often the basis for why many urban African American youth turn so faithfully to urban pain killers---weed, forties, and crack. If their usage eases pain but ultimately culminates in a tragedy, it is just a loss and losses don't matter!

Re-humanizing loss is critical to intervening with substance abusing urban African American youth. When loss is re-humanized it is restorative to the soul of African American youth. It provides meaning, purpose, and a sense of direction to lives that have been stripped of the essentials of their humanity. In order for loss to be re-humanized, both tangible and intangible losses, have to be acknowledged, validated, and properly mourned. Since de-humanized loss is loss that has been stripped of its emotional underpinnings, reconnecting youth to their experiences of loss and the underlying feelings once connected to them are crucial parts of this

process. The course of re-humanizing loss is emotionally focused work designed to re-stitch the fragmented parts of the lives of urban African American youth that have been severed by the forces of race and racial oppression.

One strategy for re-humanizing loss centers around engaging African American youth in a group process with other substance abusing African American youth, where they are encouraged to talk openly, deliberately, and self reflectively about their respective losses. Since this process is often a very painful one for many youth, the allocation of appropriate time to adequately address all of the issues germane to loss and grief is essential. Since the goal is **Re-humanizing** loss, it is important that the youth are encouraged to tell stories of their losses with as much detail and specificity as possible. The following vignette extracted from a Re-humanizing loss session with fifteen years old Omar is an excellent illustration of the point:

#### The Death of My Dawg

**Omar:** Yeah, it was kinda f\*&^ up man...and I will always believe it is more to it than what's being said....me and my dawg EZ had been doin a lil crack for a minute and no shit ever went down. I mean...we would kick it, listen to some Lil Wayne and everything was cool...So, when they told me my dawg had ODeed I couldn't believe that shit....

**KVH:** "Omar, I really appreciate you telling us about.....what was your dawg's EZ's name...I know he was your dawg and that's cool but I want us to honor him here by his name as well.... what was his name?"

**Omar:** “Tyreke” (he stated softly..with his head lowering and his eyes shifting to the ground)

**KVH:** “How did you and your Dawg, Tyreke meet?”

**Omar:** (With his voice getting increasingly softer and his affect noticeably shifting) “We go way back dawg.... we played biddy league together. I was the point guard and he played “the Two “ ( the shooting guard position).

**KVH:** “So you and Tyreke have been partners for years.... what will be the hardest thing to deal with now that Tyreke is gone and won’t be back?”

Asking Omar specific questions about Tyreke as well as referring to him by name are key elements to re-humanizing loss. Referring to Tyreke by name re-humanizes him in ways that references to “my dawg” or “EZ” fail to do. As Omar began to talk more about his relationship with Tyreke, which is another dimension of the re-humanization process, the more difficult it became for him to disconnect from his emotions. Bringing Tyreke into the discussion in such an intimate way also served to re-humanize him and ultimately his absence. These slowly developing and preliminary steps towards re-humanizing loss provide a pathway for the subsequent expression of grief and rage.

### Rechanneling Rage

We maintain that it is exceedingly difficult to address the core of substance abusive behavior with Urban African American youth without addressing the issue rage. The difficulty is

that there are very few venues where the open examination and expression of rage is permitted. Fears about violence and other destructive behaviors often serve as a deterrent to pursuing rage. Also as noted earlier, since there is a tendency to prejudge virtually all urban African American youth as thugs or potentially violent by nature, the fear of violence and the trepidation about pursuing rage increases significantly because of racial dynamics. The difficulties of effectively addressing rage, while also attending to the dynamics of race and racial oppression, make substance abuse treatment with this population challenging at best.

Since rage is simultaneously functional and dysfunctional, the goal of any intervention is to accentuate the functional-facilitative dimensions of it while minimizing the harmful manifestations. To accomplish this task, the following steps are critical to addressing rage according to Hardy and Laszloffy (1995): Naming and Validating Rage; Identify the Source(s) of Rage and Explore Other Related Emotions; and Developing Constructive Ways for Channeling Rage.

### Naming and Validating Rage

Rage, like devaluation, is often a nameless paralyzing condition for many African Americans, regardless of age. It is often conflated with anger which contributes to a myriad of difficulties. First the difficulty in accurately *diagnosing* it often leads to treatment protocols that are effective for anger but useless for addressing rage. This is currently one of the major shortcomings and oversights of many schools and adolescent treatment programs working with enraged youth; they prescribe anger management intervention strategies when treatment for rage is needed. The process of naming and validating rage is crucial to the eventual

rechanneling of rage. The major objective of this first step is to provide African American youth with a comprehensive understanding of the anatomy of rage: how it works; the constructive and destructive aspects of it; how it operates in their respective lives; and that it is a normal predictable emotional reaction to disrespect, devaluation, and injustice—perceived or actual.

Another major difficulty emanating from the conflation of anger and rage is the pervasive racial stereotype of *the angry black*—and its extension: “*the angry black male*.” This stereotype is so omnipresent and pejorative that African Americans of all ages work assiduously at denying any emotions that even appear anger-like for fear of reifying what is considered a damaging racial stereotype. The failure to name and validate rage only serves to unwittingly reinforce and intensify it. When considered that rage is a normal reaction to devaluation and degradation, but many African Americans avoid embracing it for fear of reinforcing a stereotype, this creates a double bind. If they embrace and express their anger-rage, they de facto become the textbook example of the stereotype which feeds devaluation, which only intensifies rage. Or the other option is to deny any feelings of anger-rage, which is a disavowal of one’s feelings which contributes to devaluation which intensifies more rage that can be neither embraced nor expressed. As noted earlier, a reliance on substances is often the strategy of choice for mediating double binds connected to rage. Drug use often affords the opportunity to avoid the dilemma without actively having to “select” either of the two poor “choices” that are available.

By naming and validating rage, many of the aforementioned difficulties are often ameliorated. This phase of the intervention is fairly didactic in nature and is intended to be



psycho-educationally oriented. The naming/validating process assists urban African American youth in understanding the distinctions between anger and rage and why it is critical to embrace the latter. Understanding, accepting, and embracing one's rage plays an instrumental role in the process of re-channeling rage. After all, it is virtually impossible to challenge that which one has yet to embrace.

### Identify the Sources of Rage and Exploring Allied Emotions

Once rage as has been named, the next step involves exploring and identifying the sources of rage, as well as other emotions that may be associated with it. During this process the goal is to uncover the roots of rage. Urban African American youth are encouraged to explore both the Situational and Societal forces that have been sources of devaluations and ultimately rage in their lives. During this phase sharp attention is also devoted to losses—both intangible and tangible---that have been suffered as well and how these may have contributed to rage. The exploration of experiences connected to devaluation and rage pave the way for the second phase of this step, Exploring Other Emotions Connected to Rage.

Because rage is delicately entangled with devaluation which is ultimately entangled with loss, there is a sizable portion of rage that is connected to grief, despair, and depression. Internalized rage is often the byproduct of underlying grief, despair, and disillusionment. Yet, it can also be a result of anger and disgust. Externalized rage, on the other hand, is often propelled by anger and/or deep seated feelings of anguish and assault. Regardless of the sources or directions of expressions, rage is a very complex emotion and sorting through the layers of allied emotions connected to it is a critical dimension of any intervention protocol.

## Developing Constructive Ways of Channeling Rage

The final step in Rechanneling rage involves assisting African American youth to identify socially sanctioned vehicles for the channeling of their rage. According to Hardy and Laszloffy (1995) "the most useful way to help clients adopt and nurture constructive channeling mechanisms is by identifying and encouraging the development of their existing strengths." Writing poetry and/or rap lyrics, or participating in sports, and/ or the performing arts can be effective strategies for rechanneling rage. The key to the process of rechanneling is to identify rage, which ostensibly would have been done via the earlier steps, and then provide the youth with practical step by step guidance regarding how it can be threaded into their unique vehicle (strength). Once again the goal is always to re-channel rage, not attempt to eradicate it.

An integrated intervention model which addresses the abuse of substances while simultaneously addressing the underlying wounds of racially based trauma and oppression with a specific focus on devaluation, dehumanized, loss and ultimately rage will offer a firm helping hand and hope to a disaffected group of young people, who on a daily basis, are literally and spiritually, dying to be saved.

### Summary:

The paper has provided an examination of the seamless connections that exist between urban African American youth, their recurring experiences with racial oppression and substance abuse. The wounds of racial trauma and oppression, namely devaluation, dehumanized loss, and rage have been identified as major factors associated with substance abuse and the effective treatment for it. An intervention approach that calls for the integration of classical

substance abuse treatment with racially sensitive mental health care focused on Counteracting devaluation, Re-humanizing loss, and Re-channeling rage are the three interrelated goals that constitute the focal point intervention.

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