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## Emotional Emancipation Circles for Mothers of Color

The most powerful moment I experienced at the Millions March protest in December 2014 was the culmination of the masses in protest arriving at the New York City Police Department headquarters. We, young and old, able bodied and disabled, families, students, and activists made our way to this destination screaming, chanting, running, singing, and weeping, to realize that it was not an end point, but a beginning. With the audience's ears and hearts open, mothers of children killed by the NYPD took to the megaphone. Their voices resounded with sorrow, rage, grief, disgust with injustice, and pride in their communities. In the face of institutionalized racism and unjust murders of their children, these women's voices roared as beacons of hope and leadership for their communities, and the whole crowd honored and outcried in alliance with them.

Broadly speaking, traumatic events are those that overwhelm the individual's ability to cope. Trauma is a disturbance in the ways we see ourselves, others, and the world. For example an individual who has experienced trauma may see themselves as weak, others as untrustworthy, and the world as unsafe and unjust. In the case of these mothers who have lost children at the hands of police brutality they may feel like they failed to protect their children, that others do not value their lives or experiences as people of color, and that the criminal justice system is unjust. All of these reactions to trauma are compounded by the realities of systemic racism experienced by people of color each day at varying levels of impact. I envision Emotional Emancipation Circles as a space for mothers to revitalize their definitions of themselves, renew their connections to others, and empower themselves to make changes in the world.

Part of the frame of the circle will be establishing a positive identity for the group grounded in their identities as mothers. Part one of the activity would include the members

gathered in a circle, and to introduce themselves, they would share with a partner their basic information and their favorite story or moment as a mother to their child. Then each partner would introduce to the group the information they learned from the other mother. This first phase of the exercise would aim to have the group feel connected in their common identity as Mothers of color, have validation for that identity that may have been shaken up by trauma, and establish trust and safety in the group. During part one, the mothers might watch Link 1 (below). The video is a positive, touching, account of a mother having "the talk" about police harassment with her son in a loving and direct manner. Her son goes on to express his feelings through poetry. The women in the group may have had similar conversations with their children, and seeing themselves in this positive light might help to reestablish their identities as strong, knowledgeable mothers.

The second part of the circle would include a discussion of the mother's identities as leaders in the community. The women would watch a clip or so from Link 2, "Standing on my Sister's Shoulders," an account of the notable women in the civil rights movement. Often the stories of women in Black empowerment and civil rights movements are erased, and the intersectionality of race and gender politics go without discussion. Viewing and discussion of the film would directly address the following goals of Emotional Emancipation Circles: "deepen our understanding of the impact of historical forces on our emotional lives, our relationships, and our community; free our minds and spirits from the lie of Black inferiority and heal from the emotional legacies of enslavement and racism; tell ourselves a new, liberating, and empowering story about who we are as people of African ancestry." From the trauma framework, this portion of the activity would inspire the mothers to begin thinking of themselves as effective current or

potential leaders in the community where they may be feeling helpless and ineffective. This would also illustrate that it is possible to have hope, trust, and alliances with others.

Finally, part of processing a trauma is discussing strengths and looking for resilience. There are some individuals, who after traumatic events and recovery experience what is called post-traumatic growth, an increase in functioning or wellness pre and post trauma. Link 3, a passionately delivered poem about police brutality could be shown her to illustrate to the group that they have effective and creative options in making an impact on the world. During this last part of the activity, the members would share a specific strength they learned they had as well as a strength they noticed among the group. For example, "I learned that I am a good at communication and I learned that this group is very passionate." This would address the following goal of Emotional Emancipation Circles: address the root cause of the devaluing of Black lives by developing strategies to extinguish the lie of Black inferiority—once and for all. Finally, to round out the experience and create momentum, the mothers would make a verbal commitment to be each other's allies. This commitment would be achieved with a statement in unison of the quote by Assata Shakur in Link 4 beginning "It is our duty to fight for our freedom."

This circle attempts to create a space for mothers of children of color to heal individually as well as strengthen their connections to others. The trauma framework gives a guideline for the circle in terms of holding in mind how the members' visions of themselves, others, and the world have been shaken up. The aim of the circle is to reestablish those identifications and help the matriarchs of the community be effective in their own homes as well as potential leaders in the communities.

## Links

1. <http://www.upworthy.com/a-mother-and-son-have-a-kitchen-conversation-no-parent-should-have-to-have-with-their-child>
2. <http://zinnedproject.org/materials/standing-on-my-sisters-shoulders/>
3. <http://www.upworthy.com/a-description-of-what-it-sounds-like-when-a-black-man-walks-i-wont-look-at-them-the-same-way>
4. <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1117306-it-is-our-duty-to-fight-for-our-freedom-it>