Multiple Pathways of Recovery for African American Men

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For decades, tension has existed between addictions counselors and clients based upon a widely held belief by counselors that there is only one way to recover, leading to client resistance to treatment, premature termination, and relapse, as the client's approach to recovery has been commonly ignored. This article outlines multiple pathways of recovery among African American men, and it also offers clinical recommendations for service providers who work with these men.

KEYWORDS African Americans, African-American men, multiple pathways of recovery, relapse, styles of recovery

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A widely held belief among service providers in the addictions field is that there is primarily one way to recover, that is, professionally focused treatment followed by long-term involvement in self-help groups. This has led to a great deal of tension between counselors and clients, as the client's voice concerning his preferred pathway to recovery goes unheard, leading to resistance, premature termination, and relapse (Sanders, 2011).

In 1944, Bill W, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, wrote, "The roads to recovery are many. We have no monopoly on reviving alcoholics" (Wilson, 1944). In recent years, other authors have agreed with Bill W, citing research that reveals that addictions recovery can be professionally guided, peer guided, and self-guided (White, Boyle, Loveland, 2003). People are using multiple pathways to reach long-term recovery, including spiritual, non-spiritual, secular, and religious pathways (Humphreys, 2004).

This article outlines multiple pathways to recovery for African American men. There is a great deal of diversity that exists among African American males, making a one-size-fits-all model nearly impossible (Bell and Evans, 1981).

Many African American men begin their recovery in traditional treatment programs. Research reveals that the mechanism and processes that help one initiate recovery may be different from the pathways used to maintain recovery (White et al, 2003). Some of the pathways of recovery for African American men include:

RELIGIOUS PATHWAYS

Some African American males begin their recovery in the church; others shift their allegiance from traditional treatment or 12-step groups to the church. In 1986, as crack-cocaine replaced marijuana as the number one street drug, the stigma of addiction increased, as many people went from viewing individuals with substance use disorders as having diseases toward viewing them as criminals. This decrease in status led to high incarceration rates. Today, African American males constitute approximately six percent of the U.S. population and represent nearly 50 percent of individuals in the criminal justice system, disproportionately individuals with alcohol and other drug abuse problems. At the same time, the prison population increased, managed care dramatically impacted behavioral health care, the end result being the closing of the majority of inpatient chemical dependence programs across the nation. When the crack cocaine epidemic occurred, many of its users were in need of temporary shelter in order to be away from their drug of choice. As inpatient treatment program closed, that shelter was removed. (Sanders, 2007).

Most denominations of the African American church responded to the crack cocaine epidemic and its resultant high imprisonment rates of African Americans, and the decrease in residential treatment, by forming church-based drug ministries. A classic and well-known example of this is Glide Memorial Church (McGovern and White, 2003).

GLIDE Memorial Church Recovery Program

Feeling a sense of hopelessness as crack cocaine invaded the poor San Francisco community, where his church is located, Pastor Cecil Williams was excited when he received a phone call from William Bennett, the drug czar for President Bush's administration. Bennett invited him to help with the "War on Drugs." Pastor Williams soon concluded that the War on Drugs was a war on Black males and the poor as thousands were imprisoned.

In 1989, Pastor Williams took matters into his own hands. He held a conference in San Francisco to which a network of Black leaders were invited, including medical and criminal justice professionals, addictions specialists, ministers, civil rights leaders, recovering addicts and community members. The purpose of the conference was to collectively come up with solutions to the addiction problem that plagues African Americans and poor people. Pastor Williams then created, as an offshoot of that conference, his own church-based recovery program. He described the program in his book, *No Hiding Place.*

At Glide, 80% of the congregation is working on recovery. The program is culturally based, as Pastor Williams believes that African Americans need a recovery effort that takes their culture into consideration, recognizes their history and socially spirited manner of relating to each other. Most of the members of Glide Church had tried traditional 12-step groups prior to joining Glide and felt isolated, as many were the only African Americans or the only crack addicts in the group.

Pastor Williams goes on to state that at Glide meetings, members are allowed to openly express their feelings of anger and rage. This is significant. In interviews I have

conducted with African American male substance abusers regarding their treatment experiences, many stated that they feared being kicked out if they really expressed their anger and rage while in treatment. Expressing pent-up anger and rage is an important part of the recovery process.

The program differs from traditional 12-step groups in that anonymity is not an important part. The co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous had to build an anonymous program. Most of the original core members of Alcoholics Anonymous had reputations to protect. Most were successful White males, as were co-founders Bill Wilson, a stockbroker, and Dr. Bob, a surgeon. Healing for members of Glide Church involves members empowering themselves by being able to stand up in front of the entire congregation or go out into the community and tell their stories. Members are historically poor and for the most part voiceless in the society. Acknowledging powerlessness is not a part of this program. So many members of Glide Church have felt powerless for most of their lives.

Finally, members of Glide Church are taught that their recovery is important to the African American community. This is significant for those who feel stigmatized because of their illness and that they don't matter (Williams, 1992).

CULTURAL PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY

Learning about the strengths of one's culture and a return to culture can be powerful pathways to recovery (Coyhis and White, 2006). Frederick Douglass was the first prominent recovering African American. One of his famous quotes was, "We cannot stagger to freedom." Douglass pondered, "What good is it for a people to be free if they are enslaved to alcohol?" His primary motivation for recovery was to be an example of

how recovery was possible for African American people and to work to preserve African culture (White, Sanders, and Sanders, 2006).

Over the past fifty years, the Nation of Islam has been instrumental in healing African American males maintain recovery, teaching cultural values, and a return to culture. Many African American males are introduced to the Nation of Islam while in prison.

The Nation of Islam is perhaps one of the most successful movements in reaching African American men with substance use disorders in the criminal justice system. They began their efforts in the 1950s and continue their work today. In 1995, the author interviewed ten African American men who were chemically dependent, with criminal pasts and who credited their recoveries to the Nation of Islam. Some attended 12-step group meetings (Narcotics Anonymous) simultaneously. All had been involved in two or more traditional treatment programs before establishing stable recovery within the Nation of Islam. They were asked what the Nation of Islam did for them that traditional treatment did not. Below are representative responses:

1. A Sense of Hope "Malcolm X seemed to have a worse problem than mine. When I read his story I had hope that I could turn my life around."
2. Physical Changes "I started wearing a suit and bow-tie everyday. This is important, because when I was a hustler, I never dressed up. I started noticing that, as I looked better externally, I started to feel better internally."
3. Role Models "I met many other Black men in the Nation who had been in jail like me, drug addicted and now living productive lives. This

gave me something to shoot for."

4. Ethnic Pride and Dignity "Imam's (ministers) would talk about the greatness of the Black man. Gradually I began to have more pride as a Black man."
5. Encouraged to Read "The way you keep a slave a slave is to never allow him to read. Reading is freedom for the Black man. In the Nation, we're encouraged to read everything including the Qur'an, the Bible, and books on African American history. Reading changed my life."
6. Proper Diet "For years we have eaten the diet that we were forced to eat in slavery, including the worst part of the hog—chitterlings. We don't eat pork and most of us don't eat a lot of fried foods. It is very liberating to not have to eat the food that our ancestors were forced to eat as slaves."
7. Help with Employment and Classes on How to Live "I started out selling newspapers written by the Nation. They helped me find full-time employment. The classes taught me how to eat to live, how to treat women, and the responsibility of man."
8. No Labels "I had been seeing counselors and psychiatrists since I was eleven years old, including counselors in jail. I always felt labeled by them. When members of the Nation of Islam came into the jails I felt loved" (Sanders, 1993).

RITES OF PASSAGES

Rites of passages are defined as culturally prescribed rituals for transitioning boys into men and girls into women. Two centuries ago, as immigrants migrated to America via

Ellis Island, many of the rituals and rites of passage of the elders were no longer practiced in the new land. There are a handful of these rites of passages that still exist, such as the bar mitzah and bat mitza in Jewish in culture and the Quinceaneras in the Hispanic/Latino culture. Youth will be initiated. In communities that do not have culturally-prescribed rites of passages, youth will form their own passages, which can include gang initiation, gang violence, drug selling, and drug use.

Recovery can include many developmental steps (White et al., 2003). In Chicago a group of African American males in long-term recovery started providing rites of passage groups for young African American males as a part of their own pathways to recovery. Most of the men leading these groups began their own recovery in traditional treatment and 12-step groups, and their recovery journeys ultimately led them toward self-discovery of their African origins, rites of passage initiations, and facilitating rites of passage groups.

Tony's story

I grew up in an economically poor African American community, and heroin was my outlet. I used this drug for twenty years, and it numbed the pain of poverty and fatherlessness. Eventually, my addiction led me to prison, which was my bottom. This led me to treatment and 12-step group meetings. After I was sober for about five years, I wondered if there was more to recovery. I was sober for years, and I still did not feel happy; I hated my father and hated the fact that I was dark-skinned. I did some research and discovered a rites of passage group called "New Warrior."

This was a group organized by white males who wanted to be better men. They had rites of passage weekends, and I went through an initiation. I did a lot of work on the anger and rage I felt toward my father for leaving our family. I went on to become a facilitator of the New Warrior Rites of Passage Movement. By now I'm sober eight years and realize that I still have lots of recovery work to do. All my life I hated the fact that my skin was so much darker than my siblings. I started talking to other African American men in long-term recovery about this and discovered that I was not alone. Eight African American men in long-term recovery and I decided to take a journey to Ghana, West Africa, to learn about our African roots. While there, we learned about the greatness of African culture, and we went through African-centered rites of passages. The end result of this has been greater self-love and the desire to initiate other African American males who may be using drugs as a rite of passage. When I was in NA, I was taught that, "In order to keep it, you have to give it away." So, as a part of my own recovery, I and other African American men have led rites of passage groups for other African American males who use drugs. We have combined gestalt therapy techniques used in the New Warrior program with our knowledge of African culture to facilitate these groups. These rites of passage groups have spread throughout the country. When we facilitate these groups with young African American males, we use a seven-step process:

Step 1 – We have them identify a group name, a logo, and a mission statement. These youth live in communities in which gang activity is prevalent. Each gang has a name, logo, and mission statement. The purpose of this first step is to promote group bonding.

Step 2 – Research the history of their own names. In many traditional African rites of passage, there is a naming ceremony. The youth who go through the rites of passage groups are given the task of interviewing their parents for the purpose of understanding the intentions for their lives based upon the name their parents gave them at birth. Internal discomfort is often created in youth who suddenly discover that their current behavior is not in line with the intentions for their lives given to them at birth through their names. We have discovered that this discomfort can be used as a catalyst for change.

Step 3 Do a family tree. This part of the rite of passage involves having the youth interview three elders in their families, gathering information about the history of their families, achievements in their families, what the families' visions were for the next generation, what the families' hopes, wishes, and dreams were when they migrated from Southern states to Northern states, etc. In many instances, we have discovered that this interviewing process reconnects youth with their extended families from whom they have often been estranged because of their drug use, gang activity, etc. This reestablishes a familial sense of community, which is helpful in recovery and helps them become aware of family strengths from previous generations.

Step 4 Read two books. Successful people read. As a part of the rites of passage, we require the youth to read two books on African American culture to learn more about their culture, and to give a report on the books they read. They often choose autobiographies of prominent African American males who have achieved in spite of obstacles. They often report that these stories have been inspiring and have increased their sense of hope as they contemplate living drug-free lives.

Step 5 Community projects. Young men are next asked to complete a community project, something to uplift and/or beautify their communities. This project might include removing graffiti from walls in their neighborhoods, painting a community room in a nursing home, etc. This step promotes responsibility and a desire to make one's community a better place.

Step 6 Personal growth work. This part of the rites of passage is facilitated as a weekend retreat. The youth will stay in retreat for two days with others who are being initiated along with him. In this phase of the rites the youths work on those factors that keep them from reaching their potential and that often keep them using drugs. The most common theme is rage toward their fathers, as nearly 70 percent of these males are raised without their fathers in the home. This often leads to selling drugs in order to make ends meet and the use of drugs at an early age to cover the rage. Others will focus on the rage they feel toward their mothers, God, or a dislike of themselves based on their African origin. The path toward personal growth that each youth follows is unique to him. We use gestalt therapy techniques learned in the New Warrior program to help them with their work.

Step 7 Ceremony. In previous generations, when young males were taught to hunt as a part of their cultural rites of passage, they would be welcomed back into the community with a celebration. They had learned the skills it took to be a successful member of society as a man. We recognize that street gangs honor people who commit crimes. We therefore make sure we have a celebration at the end of each rite of passage. There is often a feast, and families and elders may be invited to the celebration. There are certificates of completion given to each youth who completes the ceremony.

READING AND EDUCATION

Some African American males in recovery consider educational attainment to be a part of their recovery. Others report that reading is what initiated their recovery.

Benny's story

I was a gang leader addicted to heroin and wound up on death row, this time in prison for a crime I did not commit. All the other crimes I was accused of, I was guilty. While on death row, I was placed in solitary confinement. Someone had left a book in the cell, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I had not read much; I was a ninth-grade dropout, but I was so bored, I decided to pick up the book. I decided also that I would toss the book in the air and begin my reading on whatever page it landed on. I was hoping it would land in the middle, because I thought all the interesting stuff would be in the middle. The page it landed on was the page where Malcolm was in prison. I quickly learned that he, like me, was a drug addict who could barely read. I read in his autobiography that he learned to read by reading the dictionary from cover to cover. I followed

his pathway. After I learned to read while in prison, I reread the gang literature and saw hypocrisy—a gap between what the gang said it believed in and its actual behavior. I left the gang. When I was no longer in solitary confinement. I spent a great deal of time in the law library. This helped me win my case. There are thousands of young African American men in prisons who are learning to read dictionaries every day because they learned that this was Malcolm X's pathway to recovery. Reading and education is what got me sober. Today, I am twenty-five years sober and working on a Ph.D.

PROFESSIONAL MUTUAL AID GROUPS

Some African American males in long-term recovery have formed professional mutual aid groups to help them attain recovery. These are not AA or NA groups and thus do not show up in 12-step directories. One group may consist of African American male doctors, lawyers, judges, dentists, scientists, etc. They help each other remain sober while dealing with the stresses that African American males face in corporate America.

EASTERN APPROACHES TO RECOVERY

This involves utilizing Eastern approaches, such as Hinduism, Yoga, meditation, and breath work as a part of recovery.

Byron's story

The first two years I was sober I felt anxious all the time, never at peace. Although the literature in the 12-step groups I attended promised peace, it somehow evaded me. I went to a church that talked about peace, and I still did not feel it. One day I received a pamphlet in the mail that advertised a breath work seminar as a part of recovery. As I practiced the

techniques of breath work, I was able to heal from pain, unfinished business, and trauma that preceded my addiction. I continue to practice these techniques, and I know a peace that I have never known before. I now facilitate breath work trainings. One of my goals is to get more African Americans involved in breath work as a part of recovery.

NUTRITION

The majority of alcoholics suffer from hypoglycemia. In early recovery, a diet that is high in sugar is known to facilitate relapse. In addition, individuals who are addicted to drugs often have poor nutrition (Kinney, 2002). For African American men, healthy nutrition may be one of the developmental phase of their recovery.

David's story

I ate pork rinds, potato chips, and chicken wings during my addiction. These were foods that you did not have to sit down to eat; you could hold these foods in your hands as you were hustling to get money to support your habit. When I got sober, I found myself eating sweets like crazy and bordering on diabetes. That's when I decided that, as a part of my recovery, I would change my diet. First I gave up sugar because I didn't want to develop diabetes, then I gave up eating white rice and white bread, because I learned that they break down into sugar. Then I gave up pop, followed by pork and all red meat. I would go to 12-step group meetings and talk about how I had changed my diet and met other black men who were doing the same thing. We had spent years damaging our

bodies with drugs and continued to damage our bodies with food. We started forming groups within the group that focused on changing our diets. Next I started practicing three days a week eating just fruits and vegetables and no meat. I later became a vegetarian, and now I'm a vegan. The better I eat the better I feel physically and the better I feel about myself. Someday I will write a book called, *From Crack to Pork to Vegan*.

ADVOCACY

African Americans have a long history of advocacy, fighting for civil rights and human rights. There are African American men who include advocacy as a part of their recovery journey.

James' story

I am sixty years old and in long-term recovery. I spent nearly thirty years incarcerated. My current career involves helping men who are incarcerated make the best use of their time while they are in prison, so that they can become successful members of society when released. There are many obstacles that get in the way of the ability of these men to be productive upon release. For instance, in the state of Illinois where I live, there are 81 jobs that require a license that you are not eligible for if you are a convicted felon, including being a barber, braiding someone's hair, or cutting the hedges on someone's lawn. In addition, in most states, if you are a convict, you cannot vote, receive food stamps, live in public

housing, secure a student loan, or drive. It is hard to be reintegrated into society with so many obstacles in the way. As a part of my recovery, I have started a nonprofit organization whose goal is to teach advocacy to ex-convicts in recovery in all fifty states. A goal is to use our influence to get these states to change policies that impact the ability of ex-convicts who have already served their time to establish citizenship. I now feel that the reason I went through my active addiction and incarceration was to prepare me for my purpose, which is to help ex-offenders who are addicted to drugs reintegrate into society. Disproportionately, these are African American men.

Conclusion

There are many pathways to recovery for African American men other than those mentioned in this article, including solo recovery, dual recovery, quantum change, the use of psychotherapy, etc. This article was written to highlight some of those pathways. Below are several recommendations for treatment providers.

- Keep an open mind about pathways to recovery among African American men.
- Allow the client to be the teacher in terms of choosing his pathway to recovery.
- Provide education about multiple pathways to recovery.

- Invite African American men in long-term to be guest speakers about their pathways to recovery.
- Include literature on various pathways to recovery in client packets.
- Visit church-based drug ministries and other mutual aid groups frequented by African American males to learn firsthand about their experiences and to relationship build so that you can make referrals.

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