

Racism Needs to Be Heard and Addressed

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June 2 – 2020 – New York, NY -- Following the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, the American Psychoanalytic Association (APSA) calls for not only recognizing, but substantively addressing the profoundly destructive cycles of racial hatred, violence, and trauma in the United States.

“As psychoanalysts, we know that only when trauma can be spoken about, when it is truly heard, can it be healed,” said William Glover, president of the American Psychoanalytic Association. “The current protests and unrest are communicating a denied pain stemming from centuries of racism which has never been properly listened to or addressed.”

As Martin Luther King Jr said, "The riot is the language of the unheard," conveying a profound psychological insight into the meaning of social unrest. It may feel safer, and less threatening to the status quo, for persons or governmental leaders to ignore such language, or dismiss it as misguided, destructive nonsense. However, as a society we are likely to fare better if we strive to listen openly to the human pleas from which such riotous language emanates, even as we may reject violence's apparent irrationality or destructiveness. And attempts at such listening can have direct impact on how the dialogue subsequently unfolds. Psychotherapeutic experience regularly demonstrates that when a person feels their words matter and can have power, that person will feel less inclined to act destructively.

Furthermore, research shows that when racial violence is acknowledged through fair, empathic, and recognizing speech it can initiate a process of restorative justice. On the other hand, however, when traumatic violence is denied (through misleading speech or silence), or when the targets of violence are cast as its perpetrators, a collective re-traumatization occurs, triggering states of helplessness, desperation, impulse-prone rage, and mental health consequences.

“We call on our leaders to express a sense of morality, fairness and commitment to equality, to publicly and explicitly denounce tragic and discriminatory acts when they occur,” said Glover. “But this civil unrest is a call to action for us all to listen, to speak out, and take concrete steps to address and reconcile our collective, longstanding, painful history with racism and racial violence.”