



African American Behavioral Health

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

How do we study this history safely?

In the behavioral health field we have the tools to study history safely, and it's safer than not studying history. If we avoid history hoping to avoid uncomfortable emotions, we'll only be carrying our wounds around with us and making them worse. For example:

- If we're Black or Brown, doing without the affirmation and solidarity that history can bring won't heal our sense of betrayal, anger, or loss over what has been done throughout our history in this country. It will just leave us more alone with our pain.
- If we're White, avoiding history won't heal our sense of horror, guilt, shame, and/or defensiveness over what has been done in our name. It will just harden and seal our pain and moral distress—and rob us of our chance to make things better for **all** of us by learning and telling these truths.

If we choose to have the courage to approach history, we can increase our safety and comfort by:

- Starting our study of history in community with people with whom we feel socially and psychologically safe talking about this subject (for example, in Affinity Groups with people of our own color or culture);
- Keeping ourselves well grounded in the here-and-now;
- Remembering that defending ourselves against the truth usually turns out to be more painful than considering it honestly would have been;
- Paying attention to the body's reactions, to see when we need to step back, do something else for a while, and/or talk to someone we trust about what we're experiencing;
- Taking a break for self-care, calm, beauty, affection, and/or time out in nature whenever our emotions start to grow overwhelming; and
- Using body-based techniques (e.g., deep breathing, stretching, large-muscle exercise) before and after we study history, to keep the body's stress reactions in balance.

A deeper, wider knowledge of history won't just make our behavioral health services safer and more effective. It will also help us learn, grow, and heal—as individuals and as a society.

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