

Why Now?

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George Floyd was killed on 25 May 2020. His death has triggered protests around the country, indeed, around the world. But racism and abuse of power are not new. So what is it about this particular moment? What accounts for the rage - and outrage - now?



[Photo Credit](#)

“Why now?” is the first question that one of my most beloved supervisors taught me to ask when someone presents for treatment. It has come to be the cornerstone question that I ask myself not only when I see a new client for psychotherapy, but whenever I am trying to understand something really important. At a time when we urgently and desperately seek solutions, the quality of our answers will be a function of the questions we ask. In that spirit, I offer five essential questions that have guided my work as a therapist that may be usefully applied now.

1. Why now? When someone sits down in my office for the first time, their story is new to me but not to them. First sessions are also last straws. “Enough is enough,” my client is saying. I believe this is what the protests around the world are saying in the wake of George Floyd’s death. This is what the “Black Lives Matter” mural outside St. John’s Church in Washington, DC is saying. Like an individual seeking therapy, it is the lowest and highest of moments. Things have gotten so bad that they can no longer be tolerated or ignored - that’s the low point. But this moment also is filled with an empowered voice, a saying aloud, and especially a hope, and even belief, that things can be better - that is the high point.

2. Who am I to help? I am a white girl who has enjoyed the privileges of being American. What do I know about the Black American experience of racism? My grandparents were Irish Catholic immigrants who landed in the Bronx with signs in storefront windows that said “Irish Catholics need not apply.” I have experienced all kinds of injustice due to sexism. But does that qualify? Whose struggle is this? Is my role as an ally? I want to be on the side of healing, and I worry that the identity politics of America are dividing us in ways that are killing us. As a therapist, I have not personally experienced every mental health condition or every trauma that my clients have brought to me. But I know some things from my own life experience and my professional training helps me be helpful. I believe I can support the struggle to heal our nation, but we have much work to do figuring out what role each of us can play.

3. What is the target? Individuals are profoundly complex beings. Multiply that by many millions and we have our nation. Multiply that by generations of entrenched racism, and we have our systemic injustice and collective

trauma. Healing depends on accurately diagnosing the pain, having effective strategies of intervention, and lots of hard work. This is true for an individual in therapy. It is true for societal change as well. It seems so obvious. But articulating clearly what we mean by healing, what social justice means in terms of eliminating racism, how being non-racist is different from being anti-racist, how we are going to measure success, and how we are going to hold ourselves accountable are critically complex tasks on the path of healing. True in individual therapy. True in the case of our country.

4. How do we know if we are on track? Good therapy makes us uncomfortable. The right questions shine light in places where darkness prevailed. It can hurt our eyes and cause us to squint or turn away. We are on the right track in therapy when we can stay with it and not just tolerate but embrace the discomfort. The same is true for the societal afflictions that are at the root of George Floyd's death and the deaths of too many other Black Americans throughout the course of our history. We have had passionate, brilliant, and inspiring leaders and an army of everyday citizens committed to racial justice. We have made undeniable progress from the days of slavery, but we have a long way to go. If this were easy, it would be solved already. Success will depend on our collective will to persevere. As [Bryan Stevenson](#) says, we need to get close and get uncomfortable.

5. Why should I care? As a therapist, when someone comes to me in pain, and I can be an ally in healing, I know both our lives are enhanced. I have also been on the other side of the story. At times when my pain was unbearable, I gathered a team of allies who helped me heal. We have piles of data documenting how our mental health impacts those around us - from increasing risk for mental illness to promoting healing. During the course of our lifetimes, we will take turns being the seeker and the ally, the carrier of pain and the healer. The same is true for society. Whether we are the seeker or the ally at this moment, supporting communities of color and committing to the difficult conversations will promote health and healing for everyone. A rising tide lifts all boats.

Pain seeks relief. Relief depends on right action. Right action relies on knowledge. Knowledge emanates from good questions. Good questions make us uncomfortable. Embracing the discomfort requires trust. Trust gives birth to hope and belief. Hope and belief bring us together so we can heal.