

BLACK INTRAPSYCHIC SURVIVAL SKILLS: ALTERATION OF STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Psychiatry tends to be interested only in states of consciousness as they relate to psychopathology. In this paper the author presents the thesis that the ability to alter one's state of consciousness is in fact a survival skill useful in coping with the physiologic and psychological effects of stress. Furthermore, he discusses techniques indigenous to black culture for altering states of consciousness and gives phenomenologic black transcultural evidence that black culture is quite sophisticated in the area of intrapsychic survival skills.

In a previous paper, the present author described 17 states of consciousness.¹ It is of interest that, in surveying Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*,² one finds that he makes mention of each of these states of consciousness several times, but tends to focus on the *content* of various states (what a person is thinking) as opposed to the *process* of various states of consciousness (how a person is thinking) or the mechanisms of *altering* one's state of consciousness (why a person is thinking with a certain quality of thought and when

this quality of thinking appears). Thus, one finds Freud's works focusing on the content of repressed memories and how they related to fragmented states of neurotic patients³ and the content of dreams. This is not to imply that Freud did not regularly indulge in exploring methods of altering states of consciousness, such as hypnosis, free association, etc; it seems fair, however, to state that his attention was focused not on the states themselves but on their derivatives. Furthermore, he was preoccupied with psychopathic derivatives and tended to cast aspersions on the validity of such states as internal scanning and expanded states of consciousness. Finally, Freud tended not to focus on the psychocreative aspects involved in altering one's state of consciousness. Kohut, on the other hand, places great emphasis on introspection⁴ (psychological internal scanning); he began his work on narcissism through the observation of states of rapture in a paper on the enjoyment of listening to music.⁵ In addition, he places emphasis on the vulnerability of narcissistic patients to fall victim to states of frenzy in which the overpowering emotion is rage.⁶ Rarely in psychiatric literature does one find a focus on the qualities of states of consciousness as they relate to human adaptation and survival. Very little attention has been paid to the human ability to navigate between states of consciousness as a means of managing stress. Yet within black culture this skill is utilized daily to help black people master stress. This paper seeks to outline some of the sources of stress on blacks, discuss the mastery of stress, and focus on some methods blacks use to alter their states of consciousness to master the stress they face daily and avoid "survival fatigue."

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SURVIVAL FATIGUE

During World War II, the existence of a "traumatic neurosis" resulting from combat fatigue became well documented. Fenichel⁷ gives an excellent discussion of this phenomenon as being in a life circumstance which is quite stressful, with the result being that the ego takes steps to protect the organism from overpowering dysphoric experiences by such techniques as fainting, depersonalization, amnesia, or the development of other psychiatric symptoms. While these psychiatric illnesses were generated in a combat setting during war, it is the author's contention that—given the stress and trauma blacks face daily as they attempt to survive in the inner city—blacks are likely to develop a similar illness resulting from chronic trauma to their being which is conceptualized as "survival fatigue." This chronic trauma comes to blacks in the form of severely burdensome life events that produce losses and major threats to integrity and valued goals such as (1) prolonged separation from parents in childhood, (2) experiences of rejection, (3) illness and death of parents, (4) severe illness and injuries throughout life, (5) change of school or residence, (6) loss of job, (7) divorce, (8) complications of pregnancy, and (9) experiences of war or natural disaster. All of these are found overwhelmingly represented in an inner-city environment⁸ with its attendant high death rate, crime, unemployment, illness, and discrimination, as well as inadequate housing, nutrition,⁹ education, and health and mental health care.¹⁰

We find that often a stressful event is so upsetting that it inhibits an individual from attentiveness, information collecting, relevant memory retrieval, judgment, planning, etc, all of which are skills necessary to actively reduce the stress. In addition, stressful situations erode the self-concept, making it all the more difficult for the stressed individuals to remember who they are and that they have survived other similar situations, a memory which produces the feeling of "This too shall pass," I'll survive. We find that the stressful event often calls for creative active solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems. And, finally, the stressful event reminds one of the need to be prepared for unexpected hardships and stimulates the need for education and training in generic skills that will enable one to operate more effectively in any situation of frustration and confusion to which

one must respond to survive. Such preparation develops expectations of an increased range of discomforts the individual will be able to tolerate, thus inducing the capacity to persevere—despite one's suffering—in striving to find a solution to a problem.

MASTERY OF STRESS

Taking this into consideration, Caplan¹¹ defines mastery of stress as

behavior by the individual that (1) results in reducing to tolerable limits physiological and psychological manifestations of emotional arousal during and shortly after the stressful event, and also (2) mobilizes the individual's internal and external resources and develops new capabilities in him that lead to changing his environment or his relation to it, so that he reduces the threat or finds alternative sources of satisfaction for what is lost.

He outlines four interrelated facets of an individual's response to a stressful event. Facet one is behavior that changes the stressful environment or enables the individual to escape from it. Facet two is behavior to acquire new capabilities for action to change the external circumstances and their aftermath. Facet three is intrapsychic behavior to defend against dysphoric emotional arousal (anxiety, anger, grief, depression, and excitement with their attendant defenses of denial, selective inattention, isolation, etc.). Finally, facet four is intrapsychic behavior to come to terms with the event and its sequelae by internal readjustment, ie, grief, work.

In looking at the four facets useful in navigating the mastery of stress, the ability to alter one's consciousness is clearly useful in facets three and four. Further, daydreaming is useful in facet two, ie, the preparation for stressful events. In addition, the behavior called for in facet one often calls for creative action. The creative act is very much involved with altered states of consciousness, as demonstrated by Koestler's¹² statement: "The creative act, insofar as it depends upon unconscious resources, presupposes a relaxing of the controls and a regression to modes of ideation which are indifferent to the rules of verbal logic. . . . At the decisive stage of discovery the code of disciplined reasoning is suspended." This is often thought of as an incubation process with

features of thinking through and imagining solutions which follow the preparation and information gathering of the creative act and which can be accomplished by dream work.

ALTERING STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

So, in more recent psychiatric literature, one finds much more attention being placed on altered states of consciousness and the adaptive functions contained therein. Butts¹³ makes it clear that three vehicles for altering states of consciousness—drugs, religion, and sex—are “all valid attempts to gain temporary release from daily living via an excursion into an altered state of consciousness.” There has been a great bulk of work investigating psychotherapy, meditation, and states of consciousness¹⁴ with resultant beliefs that meditation produces relaxation, global desensitization, lowering of cortical and autonomic arousal,¹⁵ and clearer conceptual thinking in both normal and retarded persons.¹⁶

In looking at the black cultural cosmology, one finds that blacks from many different countries have similar beliefs about the structure of their world and have similar techniques for altering their states of consciousness in order to enable them to navigate through the stresses of their intrapsychic, interpersonal, and environmental interactions. In his *Anthropological Structures of Madness in Black Africa*¹⁷ Sow notes that the idea of persecution has a prominent position in the anthropological system of Africa, and as such it colors all of African psychiatry as it is a socialized, intra-community defense which is firmly institutionalized. Persecution has as its base a view that the world is composed of three worlds: (1) microcosmos—immediate perceptible social world; (2) mesocosmos—with genies, spirits, and good and bad forces; and (3) the world beyond all senses—with ancestors and God. It is the mesocosmos (like a parallel nocturnal world, structured and organized like a replica of the microcosmos, and where there is an inexhaustible source of collective imagery) where conflicts are transposed, develop, and unfold to yield persecution, thus stimulating the need to get unpersecuted or unhexed or unhoodooed, which involves the act of being healed by a healer. One finds such healers in all facets of

black culture in the form of root workers,¹⁸ readers, voodoo priests,¹⁹ witches,²⁰ mojoers, spiritualists,²¹ conjure doctors, and the two-headed.²² This healing process involves attaining an altered state of consciousness to aid in survival and mastery of stress. Involving one's self in traditional black cultural healing reduces the dysphoric psychological aspects of stress as well as the physiologic reactions to stress and mobilizes the individual's resources by aiding in information collection, focusing attention, strengthening self-concept, and giving him or her a fresh perspective from which to problem-solve. Healing practitioners provide reassurance and seek to restore confidence while strengthening social bonds. Also, in Africa, the best way to get to the heart of the relationships between man, God, and the world is through mythology. One finds that these myths involving the microcosmos, mesocosmos, and the macrocosmos (world beyond senses) often cause regressive states of consciousness which are open to the metaphoric wisdom contained in the story, and thus one learns skills that will enable one to operate more effectively when a calamity does strike.

In keeping with the notion that there are unnatural acts, black folklore also understands that there are natural acts which are the works of “all being right in God's world.” As a result, one finds black cultural techniques for altering states of consciousness in an attempt to remain in harmony with one's universe and prevent harm from downfall. Thus, in Africa we find the art of divination, either by the interpretation of signs or by being possessed, which comprises measures to ensure the correct balance of nature and proper decisions. Christian black culture offers a technique of altering one's state of consciousness to an expanded state by letting the spirit of God (“the Holy Ghost”) enter into the body and heal it of all its woes. Griffith describes this method in his exposition of the Wednesday night prayer meeting in which participants sing (a form of breath control and thus meditation), enter trance states, shout, and testify.²³ Blacks also seek to alter their consciousness through various rhythms such as can be obtained from dancing, music, and singing in attempts to gain harmony with their universe. In addition, physical exertion aids in developing skills of internal scanning which allows for greater physiologic control over responses to stress and provides a practice ground for performing under

stress and developing skills of concentration, and, in some instances, stimulates mental imagery and thus problem-solving capabilities. This form of altering one's consciousness is also found in the mystical sect of the Moslem religion known as Sufism and takes the form of dancing and whirling one's body past the point of physical exhaustion. It is interesting to note that there may be linkages between the Moslem mystical teachings and the Catholic mysticism which developed and flourished in Spain in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.²⁴ Finally, there are other techniques found in black culture for altering states of consciousness (masks, drugs, and fasting) not discussed here, as it is not the goal of this paper to be an exposition on all the types of techniques used by blacks to alter their states of consciousness to enable them to adapt to life, but rather to point out that blacks do in fact use such techniques to alter their consciousness to enhance their survival potential.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that one of the universal principles of life is to try and heal whatever ails it, and one method man has developed to aid in his survival is to discover and use techniques to alter states of consciousness. Blacks have historically used altered states of consciousness to (1) aid them in reestablishing themselves in harmony with their environment; (2) protect themselves from harmful forces in their universe—both spiritual and natural; (3) help them develop creative solutions to problems that face them and alleviate the dysphoric effects of stress, thus rendering them better able to deal with eliminating the source of stress; and (4) help them change the course of their life's path toward a more rewarding future. While it may not be true that all blacks use traditional black techniques of altering consciousness, and some may in fact borrow consciousness-altering techniques from many different cultures, leading to a more eclectic approach to consciousness (depending on how the individual was acculturated), it is true that black people are culturally, historically, and spiritually involved in using altered states of consciousness to better survive in their life circumstances.

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