

How Generational Traumas Hide in Black Families

In many black homes, pain is inherited before it is understood. The mental and emotional abuse is masked as discipline, strength, and my personal favorite, “tough love.” We’ve made these things so normalized that they rarely get called out for what it is. Parents and caregivers who were more often than not raised under the same methods of harm tend to pass down the belief that love must hurt, respect has to be taken through fear, and silence is strength. For generations, this form of abuse has become a way of survival. Still, the ongoing cost has been the emotional well-being of Black children who grow into adults who are trying to decipher if what they experienced was love or control.

Emotional abuse in black families doesn't always come in the form of yelling or punishment. Sometimes, it's judgmental silence or a condescending tone when expressing yourself. It's being taught to ignore your emotions to avoid talking back or acting like you have an attitude. These practices chip away at your self-worth, leaving you feeling unseen, unheard, and unprotected in your home. But the emotional numbness they expect isn't a form of protection; it is wounds that are disguised as armor.

The behaviors that are meant to protect Black children from the outside world are breaking them down before they can even face it. Emotional and mental abuse is tough to name in Black families because of how deeply it's tied to culture and respect. Children, including myself, were taught to stay in a child's place and never question an adult; if you tried to speak up, you were considered ungrateful and disrespectful.

In the last two years, I've personally learned that I have generational trauma, but I didn't realize I did until I began talking about it. Firstly, my mother and I realized that our family had forced our insecurities upon us as we were growing up. As younger children, we never cared about beauty or body size, but they got pointed out once we reached a certain age. Believe it or not, we got noticed for two different things. During my mother's time, being bigger wasn't a thing men were attracted to, and she told me how hearing her family members constantly compare her to smaller women and calling her plus size was terrible for her self-esteem, and even to this day, she continues to try different methods to try and lose weight. I remember being younger and waiting for her to get out of surgeries, scared she wouldn't make it because she didn't know what was going on or why she needed them.

I, on the other hand, was constantly being made fun of for being too small, not only by my family but by the families of my friends, which has led me to try all kinds of methods to gain weight, from 2 Ensure a day on top of the 2200-calorie protein shakes I would drink a day. I used to force-feed myself to gain weight, and she would force herself to throw it up. We had two opposite behaviors that were rooted in the same pain: the belief that our bodies were problems we had to fix. She wanted to disappear, and I wanted to be seen, and the generational trauma that caused it tangled us up in shame and discomfort. Unfortunately, hearing people you love tell you how everything is wrong with you will continue to haunt you for years, but it helped me and my mother bond, and we've gotten closer ever since that moment. We love our parents deeply and know they did their best despite their own wounds. Making it more challenging to confront them with the truth.

Black families are full of love, resilience, creativity, and legacy, but also generational pain, secrets, and wounds. We must be willing to critique these generational curses to heal them. We tell the truth and call out the mental and emotional abuse we endured. We must create a safe space for the next generation to feel whole, seen, and heard.