



MY JOURNEY WITH NASW IN MY MISSION TO REQUIRE ANTIRACISM TRAINING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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I've been asked to write about my experience and impressions in working with the NASW MA Chapter regarding my mission to support therapists in learning how to do antiracism work in the therapy room. My goal is to require social workers to be trained in an immersive, year-long model of 18 CEs in antiracism education over a two-year period of licensure requirements, followed by 6 CEs in subsequent two-year licensing cycles. My efforts, thus far in the spirit of collaboration across all mental health workers, particularly my own member organization of the NASW MA Chapter, have been met with lukewarm interest, at best. Perhaps it's my approach? Perhaps not. To answer this question, it's important to address events in a historical context.

Last summer, in June of 2021, the NASW finally publicly called itself out in the "NASW Report to the Profession on Racial Justice Priorities and Action" with a report entitled "Undoing Racism Through Social Work." In an effort of accountability which can be read online currently, the NASW specifically cited their historic participation in building and running segregated settlement houses, blocking African Americans from gaining the right to vote, supporting eugenics theories and programs, helping recruit Black men into the infamous Tuskegee Experiment, participating in the removal of Native American children from their families and placement in boarding schools, being part of intake teams at Japanese internment camps during World War II, and "limited delivery of health care, mental health treatment and social services to people of color."

Eight months prior to this NASW published report, in October of 2020, I attended the New England Association of Family and Systemic Therapy (NEAFST) presentation of the State of Therapy 2020 Conference; a collaborative, inspiring and compelling gathering of therapists, including LMFT, LMHC and LICSW providers. In the day-long antiracism portion of the training I signed up for, participants were called to commit to one action step in the work of dismantling racism. This work was for those of us with white privilege: a call to commit to the next steps of moving the needle further toward dismantling systemic racism and creating racial justice for BIPOC in a tangible way. That day, I committed to developing myself as a better ally, activist,

and advocate, with a strong desire to support others in having the kind of moving experience I had in the State of Therapy 2020. I wanted to keep the interest, curiosity, and support for myself and others alive in the form of gaining more knowledge, inspiration, and skills. As a social worker, sex therapist, and family systems therapist, I decided to pursue a dialogue with the NASW MA Chapter to encourage a mandate for a 6 CE antiracism training as a requirement for licensure. I began my journey, making many mistakes along the way, and quite sure I am still making them.

From inside these NEAFast antiracism Zoom training rooms, including State of Therapy 2020 and the NEAFast guided reflection group, “Moving Toward Antiracism,” hosted by Jennifer Driscoll, LMFT in 2021, I’ve witnessed a tremendous amount of shame and fear among therapists for having very little knowledge and skills regarding best practices with BIPOC clients and communities. I have come to understand that social workers are often acutely aware of their own marked deficits in the how-to of dismantling racism and oppression in the therapy room. Regrettably, we are not as far from the beginnings of social work as we might like to believe, when there are so many social workers who have done and continue to do international mission work. I have seen therapists become tearful in immersive trainings upon the realization that church mission work is often racist, in the form of white savior-ism. They were unaware and in the words of author Layla F. Saad, “Once you begin to see it, you can’t unsee it.”

I was acutely aware of micro-aggressions, and worse, occurring in so many places. On My NASW Community, a national website forum for social workers, I read a post from a young, Black, female social work student who reached out to this online community with her impressions that the social work licensing test seemed “oppressive.” In response, two white, social workers, one male from Maryland and one female from Arkansas, explicitly stated in the thread to the young student that “perhaps the test is not racist, but simply too hard.” A sea of 120 shocked and horrified responders spoke up and called them out. Quickly navigating through channels to report this to the NASW MA chapter, and requesting a moderator step in, I was promised that a report would be made. This was all happening on the heels of the former presidential administration's OMB director eliminating federal anti-racism training, a perpetuation of more white supremacy already so prevalent in Washington, and the deaths that same year of George Floyd in May of 2020, Breonna Taylor in March of 2020 and Ahmaud Arbery in February of 2020.

In December of 2020, in the email thread I initiated to the NASW MA Chapter, I expressed my significant concerns about racism within social work communities, and saw an intensifying need to require quality antiracism education. I wrote, “As an ally in the antiracist movement, I am...ethically compelled to call together those of us in the NASW who are allies in the change movement at such an important time in our history. My dream goal is to advocate for a mandatory, high-quality 6 CE-minimum antiracism training, such as was created in NEAFast's State of Therapy 2020 on October 2, 2020, with NASW requiring its licensed social workers, in the same way they are now requiring a mandatory training on domestic violence (D.V.) as of this year in 2020.” I was told that mandating any specific trainings, (such as the recent training requirement in D.V. for a one-time credit of 2 CEs) would take years in a court of law to pass, perhaps as many as seven or more years. I was told that sort of legislative change takes “a long time;” that the 2 CE required training in domestic violence was the result of a law that took many years of work and applied to many different licensed professions, including medical doctors, nurses, psychologists, and others. Along with that information, I was also told that antiracism can never be realized in one training, but over a lifetime. I was also aware that, to my knowledge, NASW was offering very limited, if any, trainings on how to access a developed skillset to address

racism and race in the therapy room. So I turned to my systems therapy colleague and NEAFAST Executive Director, Jeremiah Gibson, LMFT, CST.

Together, Jeremiah and I wanted to collaborate with the NASW MA Chapter, so with Jeremiah, as the Executive Director of NEAFAST, we requested a meeting to present our idea to help do our part in helping our colleagues, some of whom were suffering in silence. Our idea was not only to support these colleagues by offering trainings, but to model collaboration and unification among all therapists; Licensed Social Workers, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists and Licensed Mental Health Counselors in our own home Commonwealth of MA, in the spirit of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) mission to “advance safe, competent, and ethical practices to strengthen public protection” and ASWB’s vision “that all social workers...protect clients and client systems.” We got a meeting that following summer.

In the meantime, I created a petition and posted it on change.org, spread the word and encouraged my colleagues and the public, via the mechanism of licensing requirements, to help me create a bill to ultimately become a law (or so I thought that’s how it worked). Social workers, I felt, should have greater access to affordable, quality, immersive, educational and transformational experiences to develop themselves and their skills for the greater good of those we serve. Based on the outstanding 2021 year-long immersive NEAFAST training I was attending, I proposed one 18 CE intensive course, plus a minimum of 6 CEs in every two-year licensing cycle thereafter, to educate social work providers for best practices and better treatment outcomes. My dream is for all social workers with white privilege to acknowledge and understand, layer upon layer, how white silence, white apathy, and white fragility harms our clients, families and communities, particularly in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has devastated BIPOC communities with socioeconomic disparities and lack of access to quality health care. In the petition, I called for best social work practices, including both clinical and social justice work, to aim to dismantle systemic racist structures, reduce and resolve minority stress and genetic weathering (the deterioration of the health of African-American individuals, particularly Black women, due to cumulative exposure to socioeconomic disadvantage) on local, state and national levels for the optimal health and well-being of all communities.

At our long-anticipated meeting with the NASW MA Chapter, I presented our idea for a ready-made, inspiring, and collaborative day-long 6 CE course in the form of the NEAFAST State of Therapy 2020 Conference with highly effective speakers of color. The moving and powerful team of leaders included Lanisha Allen, Lisa Saunders, and Simone Matthews, emphasizing Self-of-the-Therapist work, a critical component supporting therapists in becoming developed agents of change. We also emphasized the opportunity for Massachusetts social workers and therapists to become leaders in the national charge for organizing change for social and racial equity and justice, (e.g., think Affordable Care Act, Labor Movement of the 1930s, this writer’s own diverse city of New Bedford as a major player in the Underground Railroad) with the idea to work inclusively with multiple licensing groups, MFTs and MSWs, joining forces to create significant change in a shared vision and mission of equity and justice for all. Understanding that the work of transformation is prolonged and immersive, Jeremiah and I were also ready to offer the 18 CE course “Moving Toward Antiracism.”

In response, NASW offered an invitation to follow up in the future for more discussions about NASW’s antiracism course offerings, hence my impression and memory of a lukewarm reception.

Thereafter, I received an email from the NASW MA Chapter requesting thoughts from social workers regarding whether antiracism and anti-oppression training should be required or suggested. You can guess my response, based on the enormous and widespread need I was observing amongst social workers and others who were sharing, sometimes tearfully, inside the NEAFAST Zoom training rooms.

In January of 2022, I received an email reporting that a mandate had been passed in September of 2021 requiring 2 CEs in antiracism training and 1 CE in anti-oppression training for social workers. This is certainly a move in the right direction, but a far cry from supporting the deep, reflective Self-of-the-Therapist work needed for providers of mental health to do effective antiracism work.

The NASW summertime symposium of 2022 has sixty-one course-offerings. Out of sixty-one, there are approximately six separate 1.5 CE trainings addressing racism. As far as I could see, none of the offerings utilizes phrases such as “Self-of-the-Therapist,” self-reflection or self-examination in the course descriptions. NEAFAST continues to offer, for the second year “Moving Toward Antiracism,” a guided reflection group, available for \$50 and 15 CEs beginning March 11, 2022. The word is out on the NASW email list serve. Another new offering by NEAFAST, beginning in February of 2022 is “Next Steps on the Journey: Moving Toward Antiracism Followup” hosted by Jennifer Driscoll, LMFT, to specifically address the urgent need many therapists have expressed to effectively learn how to address race, racism, and oppression in the therapy room.

Recently, when the NASW National call for proposals appeared via email, NEAFAST looked into submitting the immersive antiracism online trainings described herein, and found that the submission deadline of February 14, 2022 called for proposals that will be “presented live, in-person. Virtual presentations will not be accepted.” With COVID-19, NEAFAST trainings have been online only. For now, NEAFAST awaits opportunities to submit online training proposals to both the NASW National and the NASW MA Chapter.

In a spirit of accountability, the NASW has called for the individual to “do the work to understand white supremacy and the oppressive logic...through self-examination and reflection.” NASW calls for social workers to “hold ourselves accountable...facilitate genuine discussions across the organization...emphasize transformative solutions that impact multiple systems.” The NASW stated it strives to “create momentum towards systemic changes that reduce disparate outcomes by race” and “draw community attention to racial equity issues, raise awareness about the history and systems behind the issues.” I am calling for the facilitation of more than discussions, but clear next steps demonstrating inclusion and collaboration, organizing multiple organizations, such as NASW and NEAFAST in a unified movement, giving tools to all of the providers who support BIPOC.

Connecting the past to the present will hopefully pivot and propel us into a future that combines the power of systems working collaboratively. Social work has played an active part in racist practices and thankfully the organization has apologized and called itself out; indeed a first step and hopefully one of many. As you can see, my story speaks to white apathy and white fragility, written about by many, including Layla F. Saad in her book *Me and White Supremacy*. I hope that NASW will see the value in highly affordable and effective, immersive learning opportunities like the annual NEAFAST State of Therapy Conference, “Moving Toward

Antiracism,” and “Next Steps on the Journey: Moving Toward Antiracism Followup,” choosing to collaborate with us and encouraging their members to sign up.

As providers, we all have an ethical duty to develop competence which requires time and effort; acquiring knowledge and applying learned skills, not from the occasional training or workshop, but through one’s own ever-evolving development, utilizing Self-of-the-Therapist work and other facets of learning, such as gaining knowledge, collaborating, listening, and contributing. To echo my NASW MA colleague, it is true that this does not happen in one or two or three hours. There is, however, access to the NEAFAST prolonged and immersive format. With dedication to a productive process and commitment to providing ethical care, I remain hopeful that NASW will tap into the resources offered at NEAFAST “in order to protect clients and client systems” per the ASWB.

“Collaborative alliances involve (1) being honest even when it’s difficult, (2) not tampering with the truth...(3) confronting yourself...(4) operating from the best in you” (Schnarch, 2009). Keeping in mind the critical idea of differentiated truth-telling (Bowen, 1978), the NASW and all organizations of mental health providers, including NEAFAST, have a unilateral responsibility to call out protections of systems as they exist currently; systems that create barriers to optimal mental health due to the structure of systemic racism, which is complicit in the lack of access for BIPOC to quality health care, including for BIPOC healthcare providers, with whom we work alongside and refer to our therapy practices, and rely on for our own healthcare.

NASW quoted James Baldwin: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” I hear the clock ticking and hope this piece will contribute to facilitating the much-needed change in systems, and a future where organizations, such as NEAFAST and NASW, work in collaboration together.

References

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