Thank you for joining our mailing list! Please enjoy your preview of Urban Trauma.
Praise for Urban Trauma

“This book helps me understand the impact of urban trauma on conditions in my city that my administration works to ameliorate. Dr. Akbar’s poignant stories and insight into negative, often disruptive behaviors of children - and adults - living with multigenerational trauma provides a foundation for understanding these problems and provides tools to address these complex limiting behaviors.”

- Toni Harp, Mayor, New Haven, Connecticut

“In this current political climate, Dr. Akbar has brilliantly reminded us of the day to day challenges that our black urban youth face and about the complexities of institutionalized racism that continues to plague us. She provides an accessible framework for any trained education professional working with students in academic settings.”

- Dr. Michell Tollinchi-Michel, PhD, Higher Education Professional

“Urban Trauma is a must read for clinicians and all professionals working within and across the color-line. Dr. Akbar provides the reader with a unique and comprehensive view of trauma; one that that expands our understanding and deepens our work with children, adolescents, adults, and families that have lived and adapted to traumatic experiences. We are compelled as clinicians, physicians, and clergy to utilize this knowledge in our efforts to heal the invisible wounds of our communities.”

- Dr. Brett S. Rayford, Co-Founder Police and Community Psychological Partners

“Understanding the complex experience of the African diaspora requires consideration of the impact of Urban Trauma on their health and mental health outcomes. Dr. Akbar, in her seminal work, is challenging the field of psychology and practitioners, specifically, to integrate the experiences of groups whose voices and experiences have continue to be muted as we work to heal the ills that they experience. Important, timely, and required!”

- Derrick M. Gordon, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Psychiatry (Psychology Section) Division of Prevention & Community Research Yale University School of Medicine Director of Research, Policy & Program on Male Development The Consultation Center

“As a pastor serving an urban congregation for the last 32 years I have seen the effects of racism and the trauma it produces. Dr. Akbar illuminates these issues from a fresh perspective and Urban Trauma represents a teaching tool that everyone who works in communities affected by these issues should read.”

- Dr. Boise Kimber, Sr. Pastor of The First Calvary Baptist Church, New Haven, Connecticut

“Urban Trauma defines a harrowing space in America’s subconscious of things unsaid, but certainly understood by so many. With both eloquence and unapologetic candor, Dr. Akbar excavates the root causes of racism and the ensuing broken social paradigms through which our youth must navigate. This work is long overdue.”

- James R. Nowlin, J.D., Best-selling author of The Purposeful Millionaire, and CEO of Excel Global Partners

“Dr. Akbar pokes her finger deep into the painful pulse of today’s urban communities - clearly outlining behaviors and characteristics that have proven efficacious for some but a detriment to many others. As the mother of two black boys, Urban Trauma is a cultural masterpiece connecting the dots of history and the burden of proof that deals directly with what’s been, what is and what is to come.”

- Staci L. Hallmon, Vice President, Essence Communications
“Urban Trauma is a powerful and thoughtful piece on racism and the impact it has on black communities. Dr. Akbar gives a detailed script for clinical and social practitioners as well as community advocates who are in the daily trenches fighting for social change and equality.”
Shahid Abdul-Karim, New Haven Register Community Engagement Editor

“This book serves as an invaluable resource to urban America. My job as a law-enforcement professional demands that I ensure that institutional racism has as little effect on my organization as possible. However, more importantly, as a father, it's imperative that each of my sons is empowered to take charge of their destinies, not simply by being taught how to navigate the turbulent waters which are continually stirred up by institutional racism, but to use those waters to guide them into a future where they have control over their destinies. Dr. Akbar's book is one such tool which I'm sure will help them get there.”
-Anthony Campbell, Chief of Police, New Haven Police Department

“Dr. Akbar gives a targeted view of the trauma that is pervasive and plagues sectors of the black community. As an educator, I am keenly aware of the historical and familial nuances that pattern the lives of our children. However, as educators, we grapple with appropriate identification of needs and may misidentify students with a disability, when in reality the needs are appropriate social/emotional supports and tools to allow for success. Educators will be able to use this book as a resource to connect several underlying emotional pathways for the students they serve. Urban Trauma is a tool for discovery and action.”
-Melanie T.B. Mandisodza, M.Ed. Director of Student Support Services, Homewood School District 153-suburb of Chicago
URBAN TRAUMA
A Legacy of Racism

Maysa Akbar, Ph.D., ABPP
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DEDICATION

Rahsaan, Kyoshi & Kalilah—my everything

To all Pan-Africans claim your rightful place in this world and declare triumph.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people who deserve acknowledgment. In an unconventional gesture I want to thank all of those who have knowingly or unconsciously created relationship challenges, made things uncomfortable for me, and over complicated simple situations. Each of these instances became training opportunities to get stronger, tougher, wiser, and ultimately brave. I have persevered through every single challenge and will continue to be a trailblazer because of you! A very dear friend and colleague, Dr. Brett Rayford once told me, "While many people are obstacle creators, I am an obstacle eliminator." Those words ring true daily.

I have to thank my mother, who often has no idea what I do for a living or the impact that I make daily on the lives of people, but whose innocence makes me smile. Especially, when she questions why I come home so late or why I get so many awards. I also have to thank my father who taught me about work ethic, imparted the importance of education, and placed me in situations where I mastered overcoming struggle. While we never reconciled our relationship, I hope he knows that I have long forgiven him and that I am at peace. Hats off to those who had a hand in raising me: my grandparents, my aunts, and cousins—it really does take a village. Now as a mom and wife I completely understand what it takes to raise a child, especially one that is not your own. To Gail and Roger Mahabirsinh who taught me what a loving marriage and parenting relationship looks like, so that I can use that as a model for my marriage and with my children. To my in-laws Beverly Richards, Madeline Gulston, and Madeline Ford, you have all been rock solid for the last twenty years. To the Akbar clan, I love each and every one of you. Ngozi, thank you for being such an amazing sister. Nathifa, thank you for your creativity and supporting this book launch.
To my illustrious sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., and the founders who graciously paved the way. Most importantly, my line sisters who have been there through life's ups and downs. My Jack and Jill family, especially Toni Ligon and Thais Moore, I am so appreciative that you are both a second mom to Kalilah. Karaine Holness, Robyn Porter, Babz Rawls Ivy and Sara Lulo—all distinguished women of intelligence, grace, and influence.

To my soul sister, Dr. Michell Tollinchi-Michel, what can I say… words cannot describe my gratitude for your unwavering commitment to me, my family, and my personal growth throughout the years... you are truly my ride or die. To my lifelong sister friends, LaNae Shelton and Elsa Gaverlidou—you have influenced my life in so many ways. Super couples Theron and Kim Grant and Jose and Carol Ruiz my gratitude for endless years of laughter, bickering tirades, and most importantly your abundance of love. You have taught me there is beauty in our imperfections. My Goddaughters Mia Asenjo and Danielle Nelson your generation brings new possibilities and hope.

I also want to acknowledge those who created a space around me, and gave me the opportunity to write this book. Kyisha Velazquez, a force to be reckoned with, thank you for your encouragement and undeniable support. Dr. Kaity Hutchinson, you are a fortress I am very appreciative of your analytical eye and all the research support, along with Mariyah Charlton. To the staff at Integrated Wellness Group, your work—our work—is what made this book possible. Continue to strive beyond your wildest expectations.

Rahsaan Akbar, my husband of twenty years: You are my inspiration and my motivation. Your quiet strength shakes the earth. Growing up into adulthood with you has been an extraordinary ride. I would have it no other way. Thank you for taking care of our family and our children the way that you do. To my son Yoshi, you are my counselor, the yin to my yang, and
emotional healer. My daughter Kalilah, the brains of the operation and our baby genius. My love for you is so profound. I appreciate your strength, sobering feedback, and courage. You keep me young. All three of you challenge me daily to create the best version of me, over and over.

Rev. Dr. Kimber, my spiritual counselor, your unwavering support keeps me grounded. Steve Davis, for always coming through in a pinch.

It would be impossible for me to end without acknowledging the many wonderful Black and Brown people that I have met throughout the years as they searched for their emotional wellness. You have been the real teachers, showing me the struggles we face as a people, but also how to persevere and ultimately reconcile our duplicity.
We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind. Mind is your only ruler, sovereign. The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of the other man who uses his mind; use your intelligence to work out the real things of life. The time you waste in levity, in non-essentials, if you use it properly you will be able to guarantee to your posterity a condition better than you inherited from your forefathers.

—Marcus Garvey, leader in the Black Nationalist Movement
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Our history predicates the common ancestral struggle that exists in the Black community;
Black history is shared by all of us.
However, as you read the book take note that not all Black people have Urban Trauma, our
individual situations are different and unique.
Two months ago I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South I said, “That’s their business, not mine.” Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.—Mamie Till, 1955

I have known Maysa for over nineteen years. When I first met her, she was a new wife and mother, working with youth in one of the most troubled urban section of St. Louis, Missouri. I could see that she was a fiery counselor committed to assuring that the young people she served received high quality culturally competent care and had access to the resources that they would need to succeed. She was acutely aware of the discrimination and marginalization young Black and Brown people faced and the shortcomings of the system that served them. For reasons that she did not share, she was laser focused on earning a doctorate to successfully address the issues that she identified in the community, from a position of knowledge and expertise. When we met, I was focused on racial identity development research, of which she showed a great deal of interest. The strength of her Black identity was apparent; it was clear she spent considerable time understanding herself, her African roots, and based on this, becoming a lifelong advocate for the community she served.

I realize now how little I knew about Maysa the woman, her personal history, development, struggles, and efforts to overcome the life that many urban children faced. I did not know, and she did not immediately reveal that she often saw herself in them. She knows more than most in the service professions what it would take for them to overcome the challenges that they faced, but she also knew that they had the strength and the talent to succeed rather than merely survive. She approached me to provide feedback on her application to clinical psychology programs, which she really did not need. My comments were a security blanket, because (as I would come to understand was habit) Maysa had done her homework and had the situation well in hand.

It would take years as her mentor and then her friend for me to fully comprehend who this woman was and is. But, I immediately realized that she was a rare talent—clinically and in her ability to understand and connect to individuals who are in emotional pain and be responsive to community needs. Over the years, I would witness her determination, initiative, and strength
as she faced each new challenge. Slowly, she would share her story and I would come to understand the depth of some of her pain, anxiety, and many insecurities, while admiring her resilience. I did not realize how her experiences would come full circle to inform her latest contribution to the profession in the form of her first book, *Urban Trauma*.

I watched as Maysa entered her doctoral program and completed her dissertation, moving on to successfully complete her pre-and post-doctoral internship. I have cheered and experienced a great deal of pride watching her professional development. She became the first woman of color in Connecticut to achieve certification from the American Board of Professional Psychology through the examination and certification demonstrating competence in professional psychology (considered by many an elite level of study in Psychology). Maysa has systemically built a clinical practice that is innovative and provides the same high quality care that has been rooted since the beginning of her career. Dr. Akbar and her team deliver evidence-based mental health services in a culturally sensitive manner, mostly to communities that need it the most. Just as she intended, she has been and is able to respond to client and community needs in a way that overcomes the mental health concerns, mistrust, and fear of stigma that decades of social, economic discrimination, poverty and deprivation, and marginalization can produce. She has been able to do all of this while being a wife, raising two beautiful children, and becoming a leader in her community. Maysa is able to do what she does because of her passion for people, particularly communities of color and the unwavering desire to right a grievous wrong. It is this understanding and sensitivity that *Urban Trauma* outlines and makes real for the reader.

Maysa and I discussed this book about four years ago. On a recent trip to New England, just over a year ago, I stopped in to visit Maysa. She brought up the idea of the book again. We discussed various components of the idea with the notion of Urban Trauma being a central issue. I noted that the term really did not appear in the existing clinical literature and that traditional trauma researchers and clinicians might balk at new terminology. She noted my feedback, but want to push the norm, and innovate in this area: something that Maysa does often! We discussed similar concepts and strategies for explaining this idea. Her ability to integrate psychology into a genuine topic that affects the urban communities is exceptional, add to that examples that are peppered with her own experiences, her substantial clinical experience and expertise, and that of others in her practice, as well as her professional colleagues. As I realized that she was discussing these issues with others, it became apparent to me that Dr. Akbar had once again decided that there was an issue to be addressed, and if no one else was there to tackle it, she would fearlessly take it on.
I gave her my opinions on how she should approach the book, strategies for disciplining herself so that she could get the writing done. I see some of my advice, but in usual fashion, there is so much more than I considered. *Urban Trauma* is divided into three logical sections. The first sections examine life in the Black community, moving the reader from historic to current social, political, and economic factors that lead to trauma exposures. These sections discuss the relevant issue *without* the automatic assumption that there is something wrong with Black people and the Black community. Instead, they suggest that we begin with the sensitizing question of what experiences might contribute to the distress and difficulty coping that can be observed. The second part defines Urban Trauma within the context of historic discrimination and its economic consequence, poverty, as well as the other sequelae that impact, in particular, Black socio-emotional well-being. The book ends with a focus on the factors that drive our resiliency as a community. What makes this book special is the way the author opens up and shares her own experience with Urban Trauma. Maysa’s willingness to share assists professional and lay members of the community to move past the stigma of mental illness, the social norms that require women to be long suffering, and men to be so macho that none of us can see the other’s pain. This book takes the reader through a journey with the hope of finding a safe place to heal. The book also forces each of us to take responsibility for asking, “What happened to you?” and being willing to listen. Lastly, it provides a call to action, challenging readers to focus on one person, one agenda, one movement that will uplift our people, especially those that have been left behind.

Perhaps that was the problem in my early relationship with Maysa. I didn’t know her story, but then again, I never asked. This is a book as much about the community that we create together, as it is about mental health and well-being. I began this foreword with what is probably the most famous quote from Mamie Till because everything in this book hearkens back to her words. What happens in Black communities is the business of us all, but healing from what happens is also the business of us all.

—Dr. Vetta Thompson, Ph.D.
Professor, Brown School, Washington University in St. Louis
Licensed Psychologist, MO
PREFACE

Being Black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be Black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are.—James H. Cone

I coined the phrase Urban Trauma out of a profound sense of personal—and academic—responsibility. First, to help urban communities understand that the psychological damage they continue to endure dates back generations. Second, to help my peers, our educators, and our non-profit and community leaders better understand the urban communities they serve.

It is easy to look down at the Black community and wonder why economic and social disparities still exist when they, like all others, “have been given the opportunity to grab themselves by the boot straps and do better.” Many Black folks, despite facing pretty severe adversity, have done better. They have broken the cycle of poverty, crime, abuse, drugs, gang violence, and incarceration. They have been able to follow a path that was either paved by the blood of their ancestors or they themselves created, through their own blood, sweat, and tears.

However, it is important to view history as part of the complex algorithm of the current status of Black communities all over this country. An important factor that is often left out of the calculation, is the role of urban trauma. It is often easier to blame our misfortune on bad parenting, lack of education, poor work ethic, motivational lows, and a host of other reasons rather than to consider the role of intergenerational, urban trauma in the Black community. Add to this a layer of stigma associated with mental health and you have a perfect combination of a group of people who live in pain and who suffer (sometimes silently, sometimes not so silently) but never get the appropriate treatment. Lack of therapeutic support, and the fact that only 5.3%
of psychologists in the nation are Black, encourages the intergenerational transmittal (what we call cycles) of trauma.

There are so many mental health and direct service professionals who talk from a distance about the Black community and what we need. The reality is that there are few of those who would go into the ’hood with a kid or adult they are working with. In fact, most who make it to the management level rarely leave the comfort of their offices. But you can't become an expert in urban trauma if you sit in an office all day and never talk, touch, or connect with the very people whose struggle has become the pipeline for funding your organization. Regardless of my degrees, awards, and recognition in my field, I talk to every one of the young people we serve at my New Haven, Connecticut-based practice, the Integrated Wellness Group. I go to court, I go to school meetings, and I talk to their parents to help them become better parents despite their circumstances. I plant seeds of hope expecting nothing in return. I do so because I have a genuine love for the Black community and I want to see us rise beyond the emotional pain and psychological bondage of Urban Trauma.

For years, I struggled with how to really help the most disenfranchised people in our communities. Unlike other "experts" in the field, I did not come into the work believing that I knew how to solve the problems or with the desire to become anyone’s savior—a complex many mental health providers contend with. Instead, drawing from the same way I approach everything in my life, I became a student and focused on learning from the community I serve and have become a part of.

Many Black folks who live in urban impoverished communities see no way out of their current situation and either try to survive or reach a place of hopelessness and despair. But I believe my responsibility as a psychologist who has been in the field for over fifteen years is to
bring the concept of Urban Trauma to the table. I completed a Master's Degree at Florida A&M University, a Historical Black College or University (HBCU), and in my opinion the mecca for the most dynamic Black psychologists in this country. It was important for me to learn about community work before I immersed myself in the world of individual counseling. During my time at FAMU, I was challenged to think about mental health beyond the scope of treatment modalities by beginning to understand the role of race in human behavior. I was first intrigued by identity development, and more specifically racial identity. Researching racial identity was interesting on many levels because I myself was on a journey to discover my own. It was a time in my life where I was morphing into being comfortable in my own skin despite the labels that society placed on me, and what people assumed based on the color of my skin and my country of origin.

As an immigrant from the Dominican Republic (DR), I was told from the moment I arrived in this country that I am Hispanic. I really didn't know what this meant since in the DR, as in most Caribbean islands, you do not identify by ethnic categories. Instead you identify with your nationality. To me I was Dominican, plain and simple. That narrative changed significantly for me once I came to this country. As an undergrad I began to read history books, take African and Caribbean Studies classes, and began to understand that the label of Hispanic (a political label rather than a racial category) did not connect me to my people, my ancestors. I learned that in the seventeenth century, when the Dominican Republic and Haiti were one island- Hispaniola, they fought and won against slavery—the first country to abolish slavery in the Western Hemisphere. I began to develop great pride for my African roots and an understanding that despite my biracial skin complexion, I come from a line of African warriors, fighters, and abolitionists. I rejected labels that made me feel inferior and made a decision not to identify with
my European side—what I considered the catalyst to my/our oppression. In the U.S. I am classified ethnically as Latina --a classification I reject; since racially I identify as Black. This makes all the sense in the world to me as there are 7.8 million Blacks in the Dominican Republic (ranked 4th for countries with the highest Black populations outside of Africa, higher than both Jamaica and Trinidad, DR’s neighboring West Indian islands).

The maturity of my racial identity and my expanded awareness of my cultural roots allows me to stand firm in my Pan-Africanism (the worldwide intellectual movement that aims to encourage and strengthen bonds of solidarity between all people of African descent). As a Dominican woman, whose island is located in the West Indies and was populated by hundreds of thousands of African slaves who fought and won freedom from slavery, I am completely unapologetic about my claim to my African roots and to my Blackness. With that said, I recognize two things: My light complexion allows me to move swiftly between two worlds that are more divided than they are united. My light complexion also allows me a subset of privileges that my dark-skinned brothers and sister do not have, because they cannot hide their Blackness or "pass" like I am able to do upon first sight. I recognize this, I have learned to accept it, and in the same breath, I will never stop fighting for our freedom from oppression and discrimination, and for the ultimate attainment for our mental and emotional well-being.

Throughout the book you will see that I use Black as the descriptor of the people of reference. Why Black instead of African American? We could argue that Black is a color and does not adequately represent the people in the community I am talking about. But I am not interested in arguing that point. I am interested in inclusivity of all people of color who identify with their African heritage, but may not feel the patriotism connected to being American. I wanted to include folks from the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe, Africa, and
throughout the world. People who feel restricted by the term African American, but feel included when categorized as Black. In Africa if you were to say you were African American they would ask what country? What tribe? What does it really mean to be African (the continent with 54 independent countries) American? I wanted to be intentional in my semantics, and careful in my choice around selecting Black, a term which is inherently inclusive of any Black person from anywhere in the world who lives in the US. That includes me.

My passion for finding the truth did not stop as an undergraduate. I quickly understood that in order to survive and progress I needed to continue down a path of higher education, where I would see fewer people who looked like me and where I would be considered radical in my thinking. I left Tallahassee, Florida to pursue a PhD at St. Louis University, a far cry from Brooklyn, New York, where I grew up.

Completing my degree at SLU was no easy task but I found a wonderful mentor who nurtured my spirit and supported my work, Dr. Vetta Sanders Thompson. She got me through the most difficult challenges and believed in me even when I lost sight of believing in myself. I saw moments of devastating failure and was even told by one professor that I did not have the pedigree to be a psychologist. He was right, I did not have the traditional pedigree that he was used to seeing in this very elite program. But I had an unwavering determination that even he could not diminish.

As life would have it, this young girl who lived a transient lifestyle as an adolescent in the streets of New York, ended up getting placed at the Yale School of Medicine, Child Study Center. I took it all in. I did not waste a single minute of my time at Yale. I learned from the best to become the best. I learned to be an innovator, a trailblazer, and a scholar. I took all of my life's learning, plus my professional experiences and became a resident expert in the psychology of
race. I’ve spent eleven years studying this very topic, writing a thesis, and defending a
dissertation that mirrored my learning. Now fifteen years after completing my postdoc I have
worked with the most fascinating people of color, day in and day out, with each contact
enhancing my understanding of the mental state of our communities. It has helped me define
Urban Trauma; identify how this history of trauma has brought us to this point; and how to
innovate solutions for healing, reconciling with the past, and finding emotional emancipation.

In this book we will look at the historical facts that illustrate specifically how the Black
community has evolved in its Urban Trauma in order to understand that the past informs the
future. I will help you connect the dots through historical events, basic biology, and the
psychological conditions that plague our Black communities. Because Urban Trauma does not
have symptoms, but instead has characteristics, I will take you through a thoughtful journey on
how to identify the spectrum of Urban Trauma and incorporate it into your work.

If we continue to deny that Urban Trauma is a real and pervasive issue in our
communities, then we deny ourselves the possibility of healing and finally breaking a cycle that
has plagued our nation for way too long.
About The Author

Maysa Akbar, Ph.D, ABPP, author of *Urban Trauma: A Legacy of Racism*, is the Founder and CEO of the Integrated Wellness Group, a multidisciplinary psychotherapy practice in New Haven which focuses on at-risk urban children, adults, and families. In addition to her private practice, she is an Assistant Clinical Professor at the Yale School of Medicine, Child Study Center. Dr. Akbar is a graduate of State University of New York at Albany, Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University, and Saint Louis University. She completed both her pre and-post doctoral training at Yale Child Study Center. Active in her community, Dr. Akbar serves on the Board of Directors of The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven. A triathlete, she lives in New Haven with her husband and two children.

Dr. Akbar is available for speaking, training, and consulting engagements. Visit MaysaAkbar.com to learn more.