



THEY'RE SO STRONG, BUT THEY'RE SUFFERING

WHAT THE DATA REALLY SAYS ABOUT BLACK WOMEN'S SILENT MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

THE QUIET BURNOUT NOBODY SEES

She shows up. She performs. She leads. But behind the strength, something quiet aches. This is the lived experience of many Black women who embody what's known as the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema. An identity that's shaped by survival, generational resilience, and systemic pressure.

While it was once a necessary strategy for navigating racialized gendered adversity, researchers are now showing how it can lead to emotional suppression, isolation, and high-functioning depression (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Nelson et al., 2020).

WHAT IS HIGH-FUNCTIONING DEPRESSION

Unlike major depressive disorder that may visibly disrupt daily life, high-functioning depression lurks behind achievement and routine. Black women are particularly vulnerable due to unspoken expectations of strength, resilience, and emotional containment (Bailey et al., 2019). These women are less likely to seek help, not because they don't suffer, but because strength is part of their identity (Ward et al., 2013).

WHY THE SBW ROLE MAKE IT HARD TO ASK FOR HELP

Many Black women report feeling that asking for support equates to weakness. In a study by Nelson et al. (2020), participants shared how depression was normalized in their communities, often seen as something to "pray through" or ignore. This internalized narrative, compounded by racial trauma and societal invisibility, discourages vulnerability and help-seeking.

THE COST OF

KEEPING IT ALL TOGETHER

Living in a constant state of over-functioning takes a toll on the body and mind. The chronic stress associated with maintaining the SBW role is linked to increased risk of hypertension, anxiety, and sleep disorders (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Over time, the need to appear composed becomes its own burden that often isolates women from the support they truly need.

RETHINKING HEALING AND SUPPORT



HEALING

Begins with redefining strength and creating culturally grounded spaces that allow Black women to be their full selves w/o performance and judgment.



CARE MODELS

That center and reflect lived experience and community.



COPING STRATEGIES

Don't pathologize or intellectualize coping strategies born from survival because this contributes to invalidating their experience.



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KEY FINDINGS

THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN ROLE IS CULTURALLY EMBEDDED

It emphasizes emotional suppression, independence, and caretaking, often at the expense of personal well-being (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

HIGH FUNCTIONING DEPRESSION PRESENTS DIFFERENTLY

It may not involve missed deadlines or dramatic behavior changes. Instead, it hides behind achievement and a polished exterior (Bailey et al., 2019).

CHRONIC STRESS LEADS TO HEALTH CONSEQUENCES:

Women carrying this emotional burden are at higher risk for hypertension, anxiety, and burnout (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

WHAT CAN WE DO CLINICIANS

- **Screen Beyond the Surface:** Use culturally responsive intake tools and take social masking into account.
- **Name It Gently:** Validate functioning while naming invisible suffering.
- **Build Trust:** Therapy may need to begin with deep rapport before diving into symptoms.
- **Decolonize care:** Mental health providers must understand cultural coping strategies without pathologizing them. Using trauma-informed, culturally grounded practices is essential.
- **Create community-based healing spaces:** Group workshops, sister circles, and faith-inclusive supports can be powerful in helping women unlearn harmful expectations while reconnecting with themselves.

WHAT CAN WE DO

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- **Check In With** Your “Strong” Friends
- **Challenge the Narrative** that rest is weakness.
- **Talk About It Openly:** Naming what hurts is the first step toward healing.
- **Redefine strength:** We must stop equating strength with silence. Therapy, boundaries, rest, and asking for help are not signs of weakness: they are acts of resistance.
- **Model softness as survival:** Softness is not the opposite of strength. For Black women, it's often the gateway to healing.

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WE SEE YOU

AS THE COLLECTIVE A.C.T., WE BELIEVE THAT HEALING BEGINS WITH BEING SEEN. WE'RE COMMITTED TO SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE AROUND STRENGTH, SUCCESS, AND SUFFERING IN BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES, SO THAT WELLNESS FEELS POSSIBLE, NOT PERFORMATIVE.

TO THE WOMAN WHO SHOWS UP FOR EVERYONE BUT ISN'T SURE WHO WILL SHOW UP FOR HER, WE SEE YOU. WE HONOR THE WEIGHT YOU CARRY. YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TO FALL APART BEFORE SOMEONE TAKES YOUR PAIN SERIOUSLY. YOU DESERVE SUPPORT NOW; IN YOUR JOY, IN YOUR FATIGUE, IN YOUR HEALING.

WHETHER YOU START BY READING THIS POST, JOURNALING YOUR TRUTH, TALKING TO A FRIEND, OR REACHING OUT TO JOIN OUR NEXT COLLECTIVE WELLNESS CIRCLE, PLEASE KNOW THAT YOU'RE NOT ALONE.



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