

The Truth About Black Women and Stress

It's critical that we learn to manage stress and reclaim our mental, physical and emotional health. Here's why

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BBlack women have a complicated relationship with our superpowers. We'll sing along when we hear Karyn White's or Alicia Keys's version of "Superwoman." Both of these odes to Black girl magic make us feel seen and heard, and speak to the sacrifices we make every day. While White proudly proclaimed "I'm not your superwoman" on her girl-power R&B classic, Keys seemed up for the challenge when she belted out, "Still, when I'm a mess, I still put on a vest with an 'S' on my chest. Oh, yes, I'm a superwoman."

The truth is that Black women can embody both mentalities. Yes, our strength and resilience are admirable qualities, but we can't truly soar if we continuously put the needs of others ahead of our own, both at home and at work. Trying to live up to this unrealistic standard may cause chronic stress, which can affect the whole body and show up symptomatically as irritability, fatigue, headaches, emotional eating, difficulty sleeping, digestive problems, substance abuse, loss of sexual desire, anxiety, frequent colds or disease.

"As a Black woman, there is a constant narrative playing in our heads," says Nikenya Hall, a mental health counselor in New York City. "We worry about how we are perceived, the tone, diction and pronunciation of our words, the over- or under-sexualization of our bodies. We worry about maintaining a healthy romantic relationship, navigating a career, our ailing parents, our children, our siblings and showing up as a good friend. And that does not include our individual needs—our exercise regimen, or the last time we went for a general physical checkup."



STRESS AFFECTS US DIFFERENTLY

Black women have unique, continuous stressors that increase our risk for a host of chronic health issues, including high rates of hypertension, obesity, diabetes, lupus, preterm birth and maternal morbidity. Michelle Albert, M.D., M.P.H., director of the University of California at San Francisco's Center for the Study of Adversity in Cardiovascular Disease, says there are daily stressors that disproportionately affect Black women. These include residing in lower socioeconomic-status households, serving as caregivers for children as well as elderly relatives (often at the same time) and being more subject to financial stress than women of other races or ethnicities.

This chronic stress affects our heart health. "In our research, we have found that Black women report higher levels of stress compared to white, Asian and Hispanic women," explains Albert. "And for Black women, ideal cardiovascular health—which includes [lifestyle factors like] physical activity, your weight, and whether or not you smoke or have diabetes—is mediated by what we call cumulative psychological stress." Albert notes that cumulative psychological stress was not a factor for other women.

Our psychological stress is often compounded by racial bias and discrimination, whether perceived or real. We deal with microaggressions and prejudicial treatment at every turn. The coronavirus pandemic also helped to expose the health inequities routinely faced by African-Americans. And we are haunted by media images and videos of Black pain and suffering. "Systemic racism and health inequities place us in the position of constantly being in survival mode—increasing our risk for heart disease, cancer and stroke," says Angelica Geter, DrPH, chief strategy officer for the Black Women's Health Imperative, a national organization dedicated solely to improving the health and wellness of

Black women and girls, physically, emotionally and financially.

In her research, Cheryl L. Woods-Giscombé, Ph.D., R.N., developed what she calls the Superwoman Schema (SWS), a conceptual framework to better understand how the unique stress and coping experiences of Black women influence our physical and mental health. The Superwoman Schema, explains Woods-Giscombé, has five characteristics: perceived obligation to present an image of strength; perceived obligation to suppress emotions; perceived obligation to resist help or to resist being vulnerable to others; the motivation to succeed despite limited resources; and prioritization of care-giving over self-care. "These traits represent a double-edged sword," explains Woods-Giscombé. "It is not necessarily a bad thing to exhibit these characteristics. In fact, strength and motivation to succeed despite limited resources can protect women in certain circumstances. However, emotional suppression and prioritizing care-giving of others while neglecting self-care may be problematic, especially if this becomes a long-term habit."

GIRL, YOU ARE ONLY HUMAN

Janine Norris prides herself on being able to do it all. She's a boss, a graduate student, a wife and a proud mother of two young adults; and her family can count on her to swiftly handle a crisis. Sound familiar? The 56-year-old is the epitome of a superwoman. "You grow up knowing that you're the one who's going to take care of the medical problems and you're the one who's going to take care of the family problems," says Norris. "You're the responsible one. Not that anybody said it. You just grow into it. And then it manifests itself in your work and everything about you, to the point where I wouldn't even know how to allow somebody else to do it."

The Baltimore native says this take-charge behavior was modeled by her

mother, who raised three children as a young single mother and put herself through college. But the need to take care of everyone else while neglecting herself leaves Norris feeling exhausted, unable to relax even when she's on vacation and unable to commit to healthy coping habits, like exercise and eating a balanced diet. Instead, she usually operates on only a few hours of sleep, binges on fast food and is content with having just a half hour of downtime to herself each day.

But being an essential worker during the COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call. "I think this is probably the first time that I've admitted I can't do it all and that I don't want to do it all," says Norris, who is a nursing home administrator and registered nurse. It was an eye-opener, in the sense that I saw people who couldn't see their loved ones for a year, more or less, and I saw people dying. I saw people wanting to quit their jobs because they didn't want to be affected by it. I try to be whatever I need to be for the family members, for the residents, for the staff. And nobody stopped and said, 'Hey, you don't have to do this. We have people to do it.' But I'm running around in circles. At the end of the day, I'm drained, but I get up and do it again the next day."

To break her cycle of chronic stress, Norris vows to delegate more responsibilities at work, take days off even if it means missing out on a bonus, unplug during her next vacation, and work out with a personal trainer to blow off steam and get in shape the healthy way (in the past she would do a fad diet to lose weight for a special occasion). "As I get older, I think, *What did you do all this for?*" she says. "*Did you enjoy your family? Did you enjoy your home? Did you take care of your health?* Time catches up, and you look up and it's like, what was it all for?"

Ayanna Abrams, Psy.D., a licensed clinical psychologist in Atlanta, says it's time to throw off the superwoman cape that has cloaked and silenced »

us “due to racism and sexism.” To help us disrobe, she offers a few tips: 1) Remember your humanness, and allow yourself to grow and learn new things; 2) You are not required to take care of people in order to be loved; and 3) You deserve rest—not as a reward for how much you have worked, but because it is a natural state of replenishment and is necessary to function well in life.

IT'S TIME TO TAKE CONTROL

Chronic stress is associated with depression and anxiety. Yet many of us don't feel safe seeking professional help. “For the longest time I thought showing stress was weakness, a sign that I could not manage,” says Hall. “When I put myself back into therapy, I learned I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't think anyone could meet my needs to the degree of care and concern I met for others.”

Abrams acknowledges that committing to therapy takes courage and a willingness to be vulnerable. “Many Black people are not ready to do that work,” she says. “Vulnerability can be scary, because it requires you to see yourself fully and practice non-judgment—things that we are not taught and that come with unpleasant emotions.”

Adds Abrams, “On the other side of the courage to be vulnerable is a deeper connection with ourselves and with others. I absolutely encourage Black women to engage in any practice that brings them more clarity, peace and power in their voice.”

Practicing self-care is a step toward lessening our chronic stress

and integrating our emotional and physical well-being. This can come in the form of prayer or meditation, journaling, cooking, curling up with a good book, having a heart-to-heart talk with a good friend or taking a nature walk. The websites Therapy for Black Girls and the Black Women's Health Imperative Stress Test and Emotional Wellness Toolkit are helpful resources.

“Most Black women are not afforded the privilege of rest, and self-care becomes an active, almost daily decision in our fight to thrive in this country,” explains Geter, who led Atlanta's COVID-19 prevention, mitigation and preparedness response as the city's first Chief Health Officer. “But when a Black woman chooses herself, she gives other Black women the courage to do the same.”



Stress Less

Thinking of ways to manage stress can feel overwhelming. Here are seven life-changing ways to find your center

1

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS. “Even if it's just five minutes a day, [find a] quiet space, do some deep breathing and focus on positivity,” says Albert.

2

DO WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY. “I watch television shows that make me laugh and listen to my favorite music,” says Woods-Giscombé.

3

GET YOUR STEPS IN. Dedicate 30 minutes each day to moderate exercise, like going for a jog or taking a virtual dance class. Movement is good for your heart.

4

STAY HYDRATED. “Drinking more water can actually have a significant impact on your mood, energy and thought process,” says Abrams.

5

LIMIT TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA. Social media can help us stay in touch with family and friends, but exposure to negative content can be toxic.

6

PLAN AHEAD. “Meal prepping (batch cooking) on a weekend can help tremendously during the chaos of the week, [simplifying] lunch or dinnertime,” says Abrams.

7

CATCH SOME Z'S. A lack of sleep can undermine the body's response to stress. So try to get 7 or more hours of shut-eye each night.