

# New book examines emotional lives of Black women

June 29 2021, by Marla Paul

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A strong Black woman is a cultural icon. But when Black women cling to that image rather than acknowledging and addressing the stress and trauma so many have experienced, they may experience mental and

physical problems, says Northwestern Medicine clinical psychologist Inger Burnett-Zeigler.

Burnett-Zeigler wants to help them confront their pain and suffering, and learn tools for coping through her new book, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen: The Emotional Lives of Black Women (Amistad, June 29, 2021.)"

An estimated eight out of 10 Black [women](#) have experienced some form of trauma. Burnett-Zeigler describes the different types of trauma Black women often endure—intergenerational trauma, childhood trauma, abusive relationships, pregnancy trauma—through her own personal stories and the stories of family members and clients.

Rather than maintaining the cultural expectation of being strong, which can lead to anxiety, depression, hypertension, diabetes, [heart disease](#) and more, Burnett-Zeigler offers Black women a new framework in which to understand how their [life experiences](#) have impacted them. Then she shows them how to adopt practices for body and mind health.

Inger Burnett-Zeigler is an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine. She has two decades of clinical experience helping people with stress, trauma, anxiety and depression. She spoke with Northwestern Now recently.

## **What is the iconic strong Black woman?**

Burnett-Zeigler: "Many Black women—including myself—wear the badge of strong Black woman with honor. It is such a deeply embedded way of life, we often don't know any other way to be. It is our hustle, grit and ability to get things done. It is our fierce love for friends, family and community—often at the sacrifice of our own needs. It is our deep

faithfulness and ability to get right on back on our feet no matter how many times we are knocked down. It is our ability to hold our head up high and eagerly accept the challenge whenever anybody questions our talents or capability. It is pushing down the pain and putting on a smile no matter what we've been through."

## **What is the price of that?**

"For too long, being strong has meant avoiding or denying how you really feel. It's holding painful experiences—like trauma—in shame and secrecy. It's pretending the sadness, worry, hurt and disappointment aren't there. But pretending doesn't make the feelings go away. When those feelings are left unaddressed, they can grow into bigger problems and start to affect all areas of your life, such as school, work, family and relationships."

## **Why did you write this book?**

"I wrote 'Nobody Knows' because time after time I was encountering Black women who were showing up wonderfully for the outside world while silently suffering with everything from loneliness, dissatisfaction with their relationships, unresolved childhood trauma, family drama, racism and sexism at work, feeling not good enough and more. These things were weighing them down in a profound way. Most strikingly, many of these women felt shame for not feeling strong, and they felt alone.

"I wanted Black women to know:

1. You are not alone
2. Your past experiences do not determine your future

3. There is no shame in feeling the feelings
4. Feeling sad, anxious, worried and stressed out all the time does not have to be your norm. Lightness is possible. Peace and contentment are available. Authentic joy is attainable.

"When we acknowledge all aspects of our being, we open ourselves up to be our most authentic selves, create meaningful connections and live more abundant lives."

## **What are the emotional challenges facing Black women?**

"Black women face more stress related to work, finances, family responsibilities, racism and discrimination and trauma. Combined with this life stress, I often hear Black women talk about feeling an intense pressure to succeed and not wanting to let their family or community down. Along with that, many say they are often made to feel they are not good enough, leading to intense insecurity. When this distress is not managed well, it can lead to depression or anxiety, or physical health problems such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease."

## **Why do Black women push their feelings down?**

"Paying attention to, acknowledging and talking about our feelings is not something a lot of Black women have been taught to do or have seen modeled. When I tried to talk about my feelings as a child, my mother who had no ill will, would say things like 'you're fine' or 'you need to get over it' or 'it ain't the first time your feelings have been hurt and it won't be the last.'" We deal with things by pushing our feelings aside, keeping our eye on the prize and getting the task at hand done. This is how we survive. We are afraid if we slow down long enough to really think about all of the difficult things that we've been through and our pain, we'll fall

apart."

## **Will Black women turn to counseling for help?**

"Black people are less likely than those who are white to receive [mental health treatment](#). This is partly due to not seeing themselves as having a problem, thinking they can solve the problem on their own or not thinking mental health treatment will be helpful. Historically, there has been a lot of stigma associated with participation in mental health treatment, including fear of being judged by friends, family or even the therapist if they are of a different race. Black women often prefer a Black mental health care provider, someone they think can better understand them. But there are too few Black social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists. There is a deeply embedded mistrust of the health care system, and people worry about confidentiality, sensitive information being used against them and perceived negative consequences to treatment (i.e., medication side effects or being 'locked up').

"Recently, I have noticed a trend with more Black women talking about their mental health and thinking about how they can practice self-care. Movements like The Nap Ministry are encouraging women to rest. Organizations like GirlTrek are encouraging Black women to walk. And celebrities speaking out about mental health like Michelle Obama, Meghan Markle, Serena Williams, Taraji Henson, and many others have been crucial in chipping away the stigma around mental health and encouraging people to seek treatment. The challenge going forward will be to have a large enough and diverse enough group of providers to meet the growing needs."

## **How can Black women cope with their bottled-up feelings?**

"Some Black women do not have the necessary tools to cope with their feelings in a healthy way and, as a result, may engage in unhealthy coping strategies such as eating unhealthy foods, drinking alcohol, using illicit drugs, being sedentary or a workaholic. While these behaviors may offer a Band-aid to the problem, they are not a long-term solution.

"On the other hand, many Black women do have some healthy coping resources readily available to them. Many cope with their [feelings](#) through spiritual and religious practices. They may be involved in organizations such as sororities, women's groups and volunteer or charity clubs that offer the opportunity to not only do meaningful community work but are also a means of social support. Or they may participate in creative expression through singing, dancing, art making or storytelling."

**More information:** Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen: The Emotional Lives of Black Women (Amistad, June 29, 2021

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: New book examines emotional lives of Black women (2021, June 29) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-06-emotional-black-women.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.