

What Naomi Osaka taught women, especially Black women

June 2 2021



Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open this week. Credit: Peter Menzel

Many Black women can relate to the challenges facing professional Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka and the backlash she experienced after withdrawing from the French Open to prioritize her mental health, says Northwestern Medicine psychologist Inger Burnett-Ziegler.

"Naomi Osaka's complaint of being asked repetitive questions that lead

to [self-doubt](#) is one many Black women can relate to," said Burnett-Ziegler, an associate professor of psychiatry and [behavioral sciences](#) at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "It is not unusual for a Black woman to be in a work situation in which she feels under the microscope and harshly criticized in a way that is disproportionate to her peers.

"Much of the backlash Osaka has received falls in line with the unspoken belief that women should just do what they have to do and put up with things that are harmful to them in order to pacify others, be agreeable and keep their 'good jobs,'" said Burnett-Ziegler, who researches Black women's mental health.

"Osaka made a bold and brave move by stating her intentions to not do any press in order to protect her [mental health](#) and going on to pull out of the French Open."

"She took some really important steps that are important to recognize:

- She identified aspects of her work environment contributing to her depression.
- She did what was in her control to set a clear and firm boundary in order to take care of herself.
- She prioritized her needs over the opinions and agendas of others.

"To be sure, not everyone has the same degree of privilege and leverage that she does, but there is a lesson in here for all of us."

Provided by Northwestern University

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