

Strong Black Woman Complex
“Culture as a Strength”
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(Perkins, 2024)





The Strong Black Woman

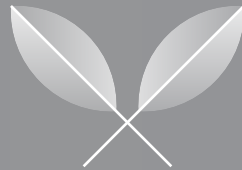
How a Myth Endangers the Physical
and Mental Health of Black Women

Marita Golden



*Guide on:
Excerpts, Themes &
Narrative*

Definition Meaning



The strong black woman schema, as defined by scholars, is an archetype of how the ideal Black woman should act. This has been characterized by three components: emotional restraint, independence, and caretaking.

(Perkins, 2024)

*We NEED to
Dismantle the Strong Black Woman Complex*



How the “Strong Black Woman” Identity Both Helps and Hurts

(Perkins, 2024)

We Where the Mask

“Twice as likely syndrome” that resulted in Blacks being twice as likely to develop a majority of the most lethal health conditions, from diabetes to obesity to stroke to heart attack (17). “I was a strong Black woman but clearly not strong enough (19).”

(Perkins, 2024)



Health Disparities

- Scientific studies show a direct link between racial discrimination & chronic disease. The stress induced by coping with racism becomes biologically embedded & literally flows through the body like blood.
- The mortality rate for babies born to Black mothers with a master's or doctoral degree is far worse than the mortality rate for babies born to White mothers with less than an eighth-grade education.
- Black women are slightly less likely to have breast cancer, yet 40 percent more likely to die from it.
- Four out of five Black women are overweight or obese.
- One in four middle-aged Black women has diabetes.
- African-Americans are twice as likely to die from heart disease & stroke as Whites.
- The fastest growing segment of the population developing Alzheimer's & other dementia related illnesses are Black women (35).

(Perkins, 2024)

Health Disparities Cont.

(3) leading causes of death for African American women are heart attack, cancer, & stroke

3 x more likely to die of a heart attack as White women

Regardless of age, class status = disproportionate rates of obesity, high blood pressure, life stressors, Diabetes

Don't get annual checkups,

(22).

(Perkins, 2024)

Bridge the Gap “Educate to Liberate” Increase Knowledge base & Awareness

- *Think: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs*
- *Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)*
Meeting Basic Needs: Safe Housing, Nutritious Food, Clean Water & Clothes
- *Access:*
Higher Educational Attainment
Higher Income
Upward Mobility
- *Health disparities and declined quality of life outcomes due to not accessing healthcare and mental health care services to aid with treatment of preventable diseases and illnesses.*

(Perkins, 2024)

Cultural Strengths:

- *Black/African/African-American culture, traditions and history.*
- *Religion*
 - *Black church community, safe-haven and refuge*
- *Activism*
 - *Using agency to enhance quality of life*
- *Use of language*
 - *Positive affirmations and WOMENFESTATIONS*

"There is life and death in the power of the tongue."

- *Ancestral Natural & Spiritual Healing Practices*

(Perkins, 2024)

Determinants:

- *Racial Battle Fatigue*
- *Invisible Labor*
- *Lack of Boundary Setting*
- *Prioritizing Educational & Career Attainment over Health & Mental health care needs*
- *Pouring from an Empty Cup*
- *Being ALL things to ALL people*

(Perkins, 2024)

How to enhance quality of life outcomes:

- *Protect your ENERGY*
- *Protect your PEACE of mind, body and spirit*
- *Seeking safe spaces in educational, academic, workplace, professional, and community settings*
- *Being proactive and not reactive when it comes to seeking health and mental health care needs*
- *Practicing Radical Self-care as a means of Self-preservation*
- *Challenging Core Beliefs*
- *Unlearning & Relearning Generational Themes & Patterns*

(Perkins, 2024)

Black Woman are Heroines

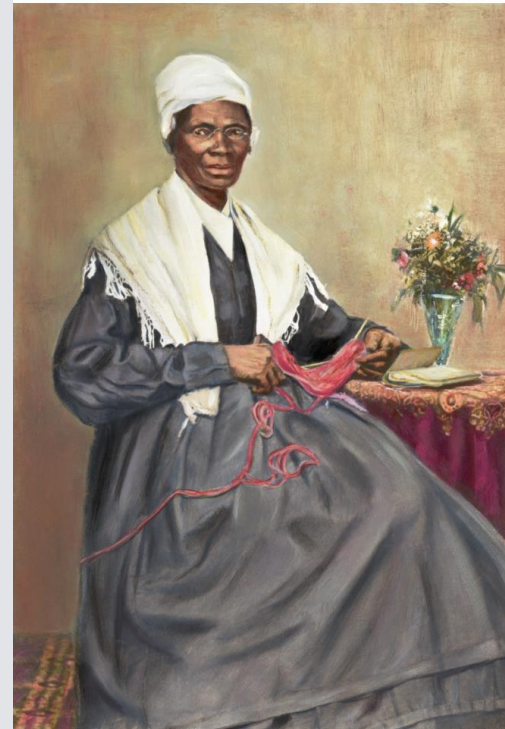
(Perkins, 2024)



Sally Hemings



Madam C.J. Walker



Sojourner Truth



Harriet Tubman

Power of Personal Narratives

Challenging Core
Beliefs

When **writing your story** there is the narrative you know and the one that you surrender to (Golden, 2021).

(Perkins, 2024)

Enlightenment



After the passage of the Affordable Care Act, access to healthcare among Black Americans increased dramatically.

Doctors say access to healthcare is the number one determinant of health.

Black women have the largest voter turnout rates.

Black women represent the fastest growing segment of women-owned businesses.

Black women in the corporate world report higher rates of interest in holding leadership positions than white women.

Civil suits by Black female workers formed the basis for federal sexual harassment law.

The activism of a Black woman, Tarana Burke, inspired the #MeTooMovement

(36).


(Perkins, 2024)



Relationship themes & patterns:

Over & over I was drawn to, and invited into my life, the same emotionally distant, withholding men. Men who were drawn to me because of my accomplishments while simultaneously hating me for them. Men who were in need of repair and who fulfilled my need to fix things & people (30).

(Perkins, 2024)





The Strong Black Woman Syndrome

- Definition: which requires that Black women perpetually present an image of control & strength, is a response to a combination of daily stressors & systemic racist assaults.
- Silences the healthy and necessary expression of pain & vulnerability
- The myth that Black women don't have the privilege to experience such thoughts, feelings, emotions, wants and needs, likes and dislikes and desires.
- We wear it like a badge of honor
- Resiliency Protective Factor that can become a determinant if we are not mindful and intentional about the use of these practices (37).

(Perkins, 2024)



Social Determinants of Health

We are impacted disproportionately by poor housing, lack of high-paying employment options, poor education, food apartheid, polluted environments, and an absence of medical facilities in our communities or insufficient medical coverage. Decades of both an overinvestment by federal & state & local governments, in policies that enforced & encouraged racial & economic segregation, & an absence of investment in Black people, has created environments where too many Black people do not thrive. And finally, medical & psychological studies have shown that permanent race-related stress is a more powerful factor than other occasional life stressors (divorce, job loss, death of a loved one) in creating poor health. The stress of coping with racism becomes a toxin that infiltrates the body, creating an incubator for other diseases (39).

(Perkins, 2024)

Harmful Myth

The Strong Black Woman is myth & fact. It is internalized so deeply that even little black girls are treated like, & assumed to be, miniature Strong Black Women. It is a myth because its endurance rests on our need to assert control in the midst of the chaotic storm of racism, individual & systemic. It is myth because it rests on the foundation of tears we don't shed, pain we deny. It is myth because it is so deeply embedded in the collective unconscious of Black women that it is assumed & goes largely unchallenged (38).

- **Normalization of Systemic, Institutionalized, and Structural Racism and Oppression**
- **Normalization of Strong Black Woman Complex**
- **Black women do not have the privilege to access physical and mental healthcare to enhance quality of life outcomes.**

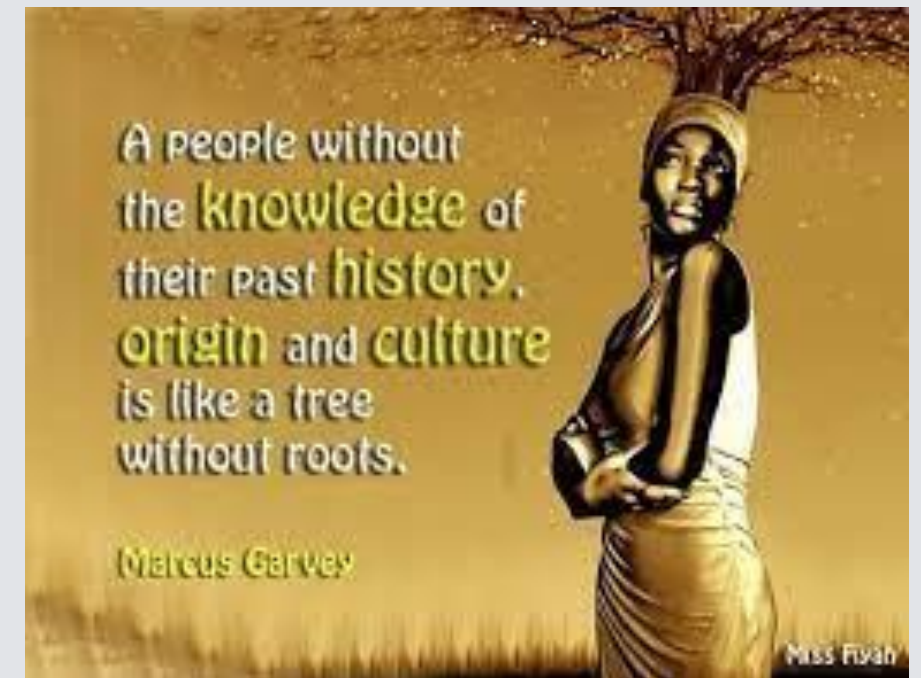
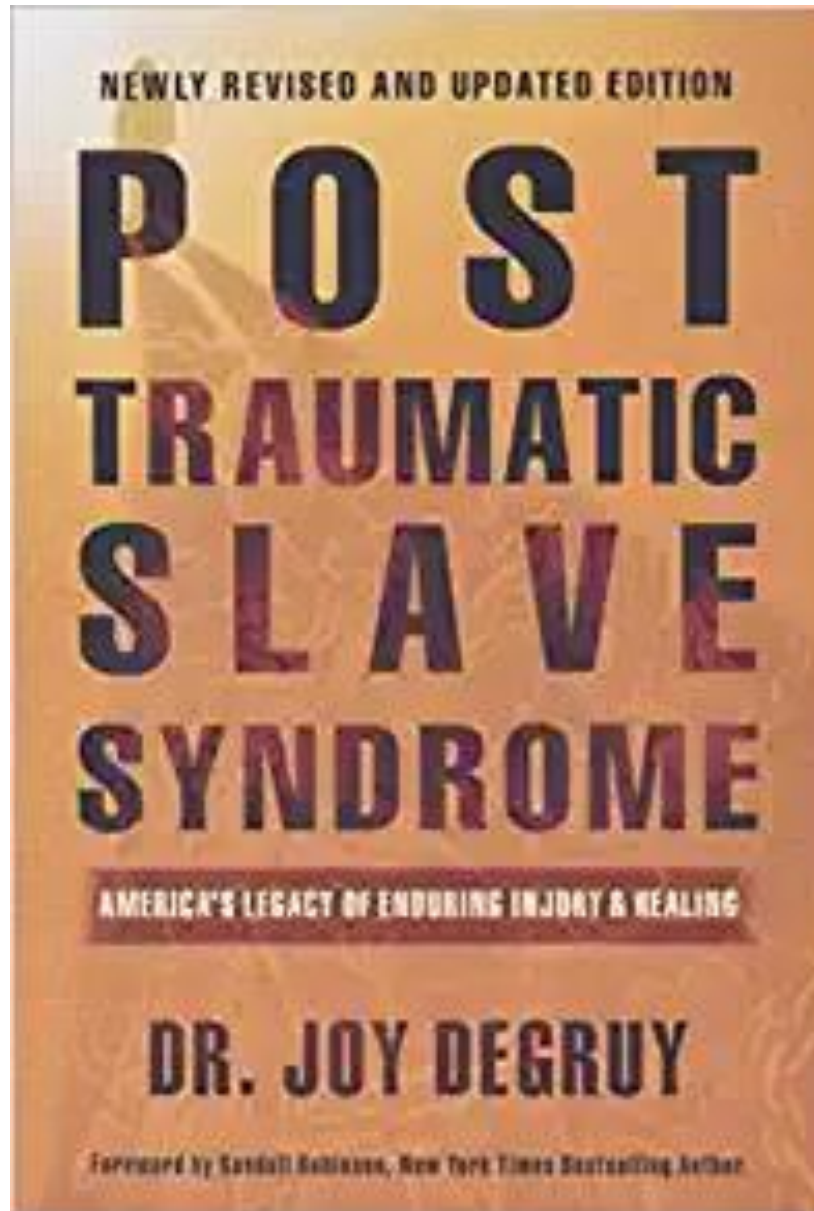
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Predictors of Health Outcomes

Dr. Georgia Willie-Carnegie, a partner in Capital Cardiology Consultants, one of the country's oldest Black cardiology practices, told me the cruel math of living in America as a Black person of any economic class means that, while heart disease is the number one killer of all Americans, African Americans are especially vulnerable. "Hypertension & high blood pressure lead, to stroke, kidney failure, (renal disease), & heart disease," she told me." I have to remind women to listen to their bodies, We're so busy helping others we show up in the emergency room or the doctor's office at the last minute, often when treatment is least effective."

➤ *And the very belief we are certain will save us is killing us (40).*

(Perkins, 2024)

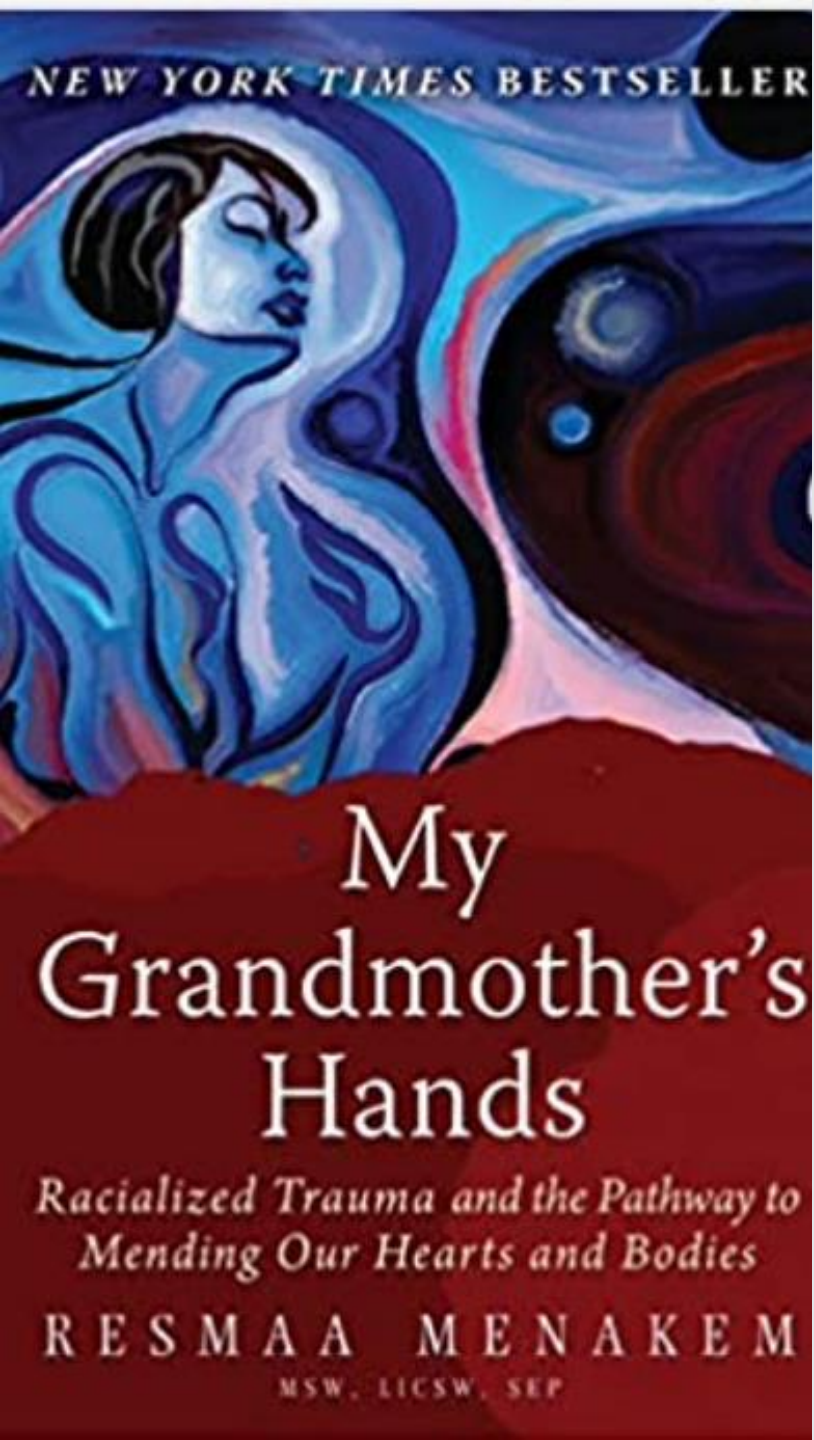


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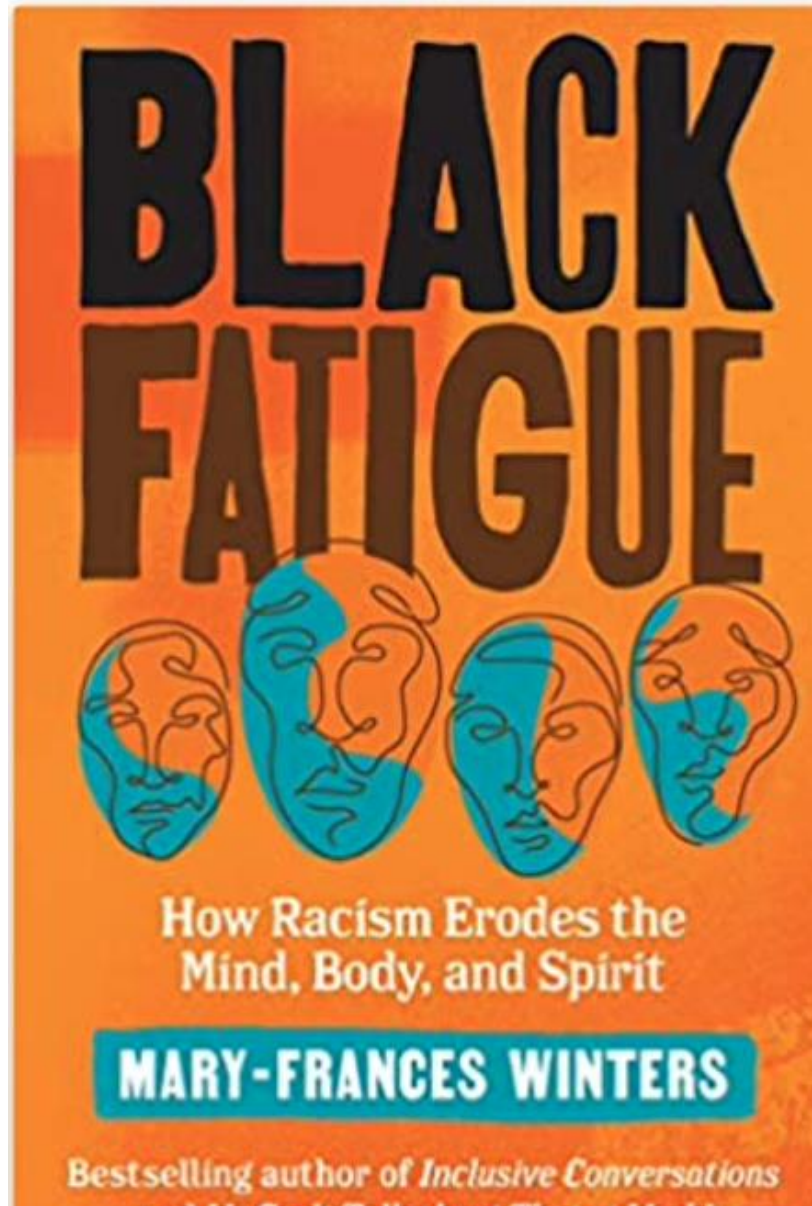
Oral History

- *Our bodies, souls and spirits are a map, a testimony to the ravages of our enslavement, the cruel legacy of legal segregation & lack of access to wealth, good employment, stable housing, & good healthcare (22).*
- **SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH (SDOH)**
 - (Perkins, 2024)



Healing cultural competency

- Our ancestors' historical and intergenerational trauma flows through our bodies and is engrained in our DNA
 - Breaking generational themes, patterns and cycles is a way to not pass that trauma on to our children
 - Solution-focused approach
 - Collective Social Responsibility to increase knowledge base and awareness on the Strong Black Woman complex as a Resiliency Protective Factor and not a determinant.
- (Perkins, 2024)



The Determinants of Strong Black Woman Syndrome Cont

- *Psyches harmed by Power of Narrative. Stories told About Us that have Saved & Harmed Us & Sometimes Sabotaged Us. The Strong Black Woman. The Angry Black Woman. The Black Woman who says yes to everyone but herself. The Black Woman who believes Jesus & Only Jesus is the Answer to Every Problem, Who Rejects the Idea that therapists, doctors, self-care are also apart of Jesus's plan. The Superwoman. The Invincible Superwomen. We have to be strong. We have good reason to be angry. We say yes over & over to our families because the world so often tells them no (22-23).*

• (Perkins, 2024)

Protective Factors



Oral history

Community

Family Unity

Resiliency

Culture as a Strength

Educate to Liberate

(Perkins, 2024)

*Client scenario:
Strong Black
Woman
“Superhero
Complex”*

Senior female client; retired; attending school part-time for enrichment to earn a Master's in Biblical Counseling and Leadership. Client is grieving the loss of her husband who passed away a year ago. Client maintains domestic and financial household responsibilities while supporting her grand daughter and great-grand daughter who lives with her. Client's grand daughter was experiencing some financial challenges and struggled to aid with financial responsibilities. All the while client is navigating systems and institutions seeking to receive spousal benefits and her late husband's pension as a member of the VA.

Challenges & Barriers: Intersection of grief & survival to thriving; Struggles setting boundaries
Strengths: Resiliency as a Protective Factor; Social Empathy; Self-Determination;
Resourcefulness

Determinants: Embodiment of Superwoman complex has lead to health conditions and poor quality of life and health outcomes.

Background: Client worked in social services and administration roles for the majority of her career. Client expressed, feeling pressure to work harder, exceed expectations, go above and beyond to prove worth and value at the expense of taking care of her own mental and physical health.

Intervention: Solution-focused; Practice radical self-care as a means of self-preservation;
Prioritizing your own needs

Gender roles & expectations: Being All things to All People; Pouring from an empty cup; the invisible labor of assuming caretaking roles and financial responsibilities for entire family unit.

Environmental factors: How the environment affects mental health

(Perkins, 2024)

*Client scenario:
Strong Black
Woman
“Superhero
Complex”*

Middle-aged female client serves as the matriarch of her family. She works full-time and maintains domestic and financial household responsibilities. Intersections of her identity and roles within family unit include: mother, grandmother, caretaker, and long-term partner. Client was providing childcare for several grandchildren after working long hours. Also, while navigating criminal legal system, court case and grief and loss of adult child who was formerly incarcerated and killed by a senseless act of gun violence.

Challenges & Barriers: Struggles saying no; Struggles setting boundaries

Strengths: Resiliency as a Protective Factor; Social Empathy; Self-Determination; Self-efficacy

Determinants: Co-dependency; Learned helplessness; Invisible Labor; Resiliency as a determinant

Gender roles & expectations: Being All things to All People; Pouring from an empty cup; the invisible labor of assuming caretaking roles and domestic and financial responsibilities for entire family unit

Intervention: Solution-focused; Practice radical self-care as a means of self-preservation

Environmental factors: How the environment affects mental health

(Perkins, 2024)

Client scenario: “Culture as a Strength”

Family who identifies as Hispanic comes in for counseling. Counselor meets individually with son. Counselor meets with mom and dad who are experiencing challenges in communication and conflict resolution within their marriage. Mom has an anxious attachment style. Dad has an avoidant attachment style. Mom desires to work on communication. Dad desires to attend sessions to support son.

Challenges & Barriers: Lack of healthy communication & conflict resolution skills

Strengths: Cultural values; passionate about family; unity; work-ethic

Determinants: Lack of respect for authority; stubborn; dad's avoidant attachment style creates conflict in marriage and relationship with sons. Subsequently creating stress for son.

Intervention: Solution-focused lens and collective responsibility approach

Gender roles & expectations: encourage dad as head of household and male role model; to model healthy communication and conflict resolution skills for sons to strengthen family unit

(Perkins, 2024)

Call to Action: Evidenced-based best practices

- *Client-centered care*
- *Evidenced-informed*
- *Culturally-relevant*
- *Health and Mental health care practices to meet the needs of the diverse individuals, families and communities that we serve*
- *Representation of lived and shared experiences in a clinical setting matters.*
- *Social empathy – the ability for one to put themselves in someone else's shoes (Segal).*

(Perkins, 2024)

Group Discussion

- *Per clinical observation in your professional practice experience have any of your clients presented with symptoms of Strong Black Women Syndrome?*
- *If yes, how did you navigate through this with them in a clinical setting while encouraging the use of the Strong Black Women Complex as a Strength & Resiliency Protective Factor and not a determinant.*
- *How can we create safe spaces in clinical and community settings to educate and increase knowledge base and awareness on the Strong Black Woman Complex as a pathway to healing and liberation?*
- *How can we dispel myths related to Strong Black Woman Syndrome?*

(Perkins, 2024)

Resources

- [The Strong Black Woman: How a Myth Endangers the Physical and Mental Health of Black Women \(African American Studies\)](#)
- [The New Black Woman: Loves Herself, Has Boundaries, and Heals Every Day](#)
- [Right Within: How to heal from racial trauma in the workplace](#)
- [The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at the Table](#)
- [Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit](#)
- [Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing](#)
- [Reclamation: Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson, and a Descendant's Search for Her Family's Lasting Legacy](#)
- [My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies](#)

(Perkins, 2024)