

# Healing the Black Woman

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*Purposeful Self Work*

Dr. JaQuinda Jackson

## **Healing for the Strong Black Woman: Purposeful Self Work**

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# Dedication

To every Black woman who has ever carried the weight of the world on her shoulders—this book is for you.

To the Black women who came before us, who endured unimaginable hardships yet passed down resilience, wisdom, and grace—your legacy is my strength.

To my clients who are on their healing journeys, you remind me daily that healing is possible and joy is revolutionary.

To the young Black girls who look in the mirror and are still learning to love what they see—you are enough, just as you are.

To the Creator, Who has guided my journey and given me the courage to share my voice—this is for us. This is for healing. This is for freedom.

And finally, to my husband and my two boys, thank you for loving me just as I am.



# Introduction

As a licensed mental health clinician who focuses on trauma at my private practice, I help a lot of women work through and overcome trauma. When I tell you I love what I do, I mean I would not trade my profession for anything else in the world. I don't take for granted that someone chooses to sit with me and be vulnerable while working through some of their most difficult emotional challenges. I believe God has chosen me to restore my clients so that through me and also them doing their work, they will begin to understand their purpose.

I'm writing this book for you. Through my experience of being a mental health clinician, I've realized that Black women struggle to be vulnerable—and it's not because they can't, but because some don't have a place to do so. So, this is your place. Through this book we will get to know one another, and I want you to know that you deserve your healing! Doing the work in some parts of this book will get tough, but don't give up. Why? Because there's nothing better than a healed Black woman.

In 2022, one of the world's largest financial firms, Goldman Sachs, completed and released their findings on Black Womenomics: Equalizing Entrepreneurship. Their study found that not only are Black women entrepreneurs the fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs in the United States, but that when a Black woman opens a business, she creates jobs, she boosts the economy, and provides innovative products. Now, I was in Goldman Sachs *One Million Black Women* cohort, but this is not a plug for entrepreneurship.

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I mean, if it's been on your heart, go for it, but just like the study revealed what happens when a Black woman opens a business, the same thing happens when a Black woman is healed. She changes the dynamics of her family and her relationships; she can walk in a room and shift the atmosphere because she knows who she is.

So, let's go, Sis! We got work to do, but here is to being empowered and knowing who you are.

The "Strong Black Woman" is a controlling image that pressures Black women to maintain a facade of strength (Davis & Aififi, 2019). It is characterized by three components: emotional restraint, independence, and caretaking. It's a stereotype that has been placed on Black women due to our complicated history as Americans. The term "Strong Black Woman" is meant to place Black women in a box where we must hold back our emotions to avoid looking weak, be strong and independent while handling our problems and others', and take on the responsibility of solving others' problems as well as our own. This ideology is completely unrealistic. But, if we are honest with ourselves, some of us wake up every single day trying to live up to this stereotype that was meant to box us in rather than allow us to live authentic, purposeful lives.

As a trauma therapist, I have seen how this stereotype has negatively impacted Black women, from how we see ourselves to how we show up both personally and professionally. Being a "Strong Black Woman" was an identity that was assigned to us before we could ever speak. It's this idea that whatever we have going on, we must be strong. The Strong Black Woman narrative shows up in our relationships and how we connect with one another. It impacts how we resolve conflict and manage our emotions. It keeps us bound to a stereotype, and if we aren't careful, we will live a life of mediocre rather than a life of purpose.

I want to be clear: there is nothing wrong with being a Black woman and also being strong; however, it should be *our* choice to be strong, not something we have to be. We will address the three components of the Strong Black Woman stereotype to debunk them and, most importantly, learn to free ourselves from unrealistic expectations that have been placed on us. This workbook is designed to increase our emotional IQ (EQ) so that we can be strong within reason and prioritize our rest whenever necessary.

## Chapter 1

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### *Creating a Safe Brave Space*

**A**s a trauma therapist, I frequently encounter Black women who reach a stage where they are prepared to address and overcome their trauma. However, many of them admit to feeling hesitant or regretful for not starting their journey sooner. I often have to acknowledge this underlying feeling within the clinical space, while unburdening my sisters from this faulty way of thinking. As Black women, we are perceived as strong when we want to be vulnerable. It's important for us to trust that those we open up to are strong, safe, and capable of truly listening to our concerns. We must feel safe and brave enough to share what concerns us. When many of us have expressed ourselves or shared our feelings, we may have received meek responses or no response at all. This experience may validate our negative beliefs of “my feelings don't matter” or “nobody cares.”

One of my first social services cases was a teenage girl who would repeatedly leave her assigned placement. Once she was found, she would be placed back at her grandmother's home. She would stay for a few days before leaving again. I realized it was a cycle. Before her release from her seventh runaway attempt, I asked her where she wanted to be placed. She said anywhere but back with her grandmother. When I asked her why, she shrugged, and tears fell down her face. I can still see that look, which told me a lot. I went back to my office and read all 150 pages of her file. I discovered that at the age of seven, she had disclosed to her case manager that she was experiencing abuse in the home, yet nothing had been done to address the issue. She was now

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fifteen, and being placed back into the home of her abuser by people who were supposed to protect her and keep her safe. Rather than share what was going on in her home, the young woman was just trying to survive. Having already said something and seeing no results, she had decided to do things her way.

I wish I could tell you that this was the only case I ever had like this, but it wasn't. As Black women, we are often seen as strong and have our own personal beliefs that we have to be strong and cannot be seen as weak. We are going to have to start the work of reframing our personal belief system. There is nothing wrong with sharing our feelings and emotions with others. Self-expression is a part of life. Experiencing emotions proves that we are human and that we are connected. When we don't share our feelings and emotions, resentment builds, and we begin to internalize them instead. When we process our feelings and emotions by internalizing them, they begin to fester, and we stop living and begin surviving. We tend to make decisions and engage with people (good or bad) from a lens of surviving versus living. On the next few pages, you will create your own personal safe and brave space. You will identify what safety and bravery mean to you. We will also create our personal social emotional plans.

If you have ever felt unseen, unheard, and/or betrayed by someone you confided in who you later learned can't be trusted, I know I can't take away all the pain and hurt you feel from those experiences. However, I want you to know that I apologize for your hurt and those who have hurt you. Please know that this book was designed specifically for you—for the sisters who have purpose but hurt has clouded their light and distracted them from their purposeful work. The work is not meant to replace therapy or other professional help; the work is to serve as a guide and a self-reflection tool that can work in parallel with your personal healing. This workbook is a power tool, in which we are taking back who we are and whose we are by showing grace to ourselves through healing. We will learn when we need to be strong versus feeling as though we always have to be strong. Sis, we're about to work, but this is good work. This is *your* work and nobody—and I mean nobody—can be you or change who you are. Healing brings clarity, clarity brings awareness, and awareness introduces us to our purpose.

*It's time to work, Sis!*

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According to *Merriam-Webster*, the term “safe” means “being free from harm or risk: unhurt; secure from threat, harm, or loss.” To create our own personal narrative, we must define what safety means to us, how it makes us feel, and what we can personally do to keep ourselves safe. We know that we can’t control others; however, defining our version of “safe” will increase our awareness around safety, so that if we ever feel unsafe, we can make the best decision for ourselves from a lens of clarity and awareness.

Now, for some of us, the feeling of being safe may be unfamiliar or foreign. If this applies to you, please know that you deserve to be and feel safe. My hope for you is that after this work, you will build your safety support system and find your voice to advocate for yourself so you will be healed from the thing that disrupted your feelings of safety and stability.

I want you to pause and breathe, and when you answer these next questions, let the answers come from a place of your absolute ideal scenario. “Absolute ideal” is a term I use in my practice to get you to describe a place of knowing all things are going your way and absolutely nothing can disrupt or interfere with you being and feeling safe. There is no right or wrong answer; remember, this is your work.

When you hear the word “safe,” what comes to mind?

What do you feel and where do you feel it in your body?

What and/or who is able to disrupt your feeling of safety?

When your safety is disrupted, how can you gain it back? What needs to happen?

Now that you have identified what it means to be safe, what does being brave mean for you?

Brave is an adjective that describes the state of readiness to face and endure danger or pain, or showing courage. Bravery does not come as a result of trauma and past hurts. For some, having scars can serve as a badge of honor. In all honesty, many of us have been told that we should reflect on our scars as reminders of what we have been through. Although this may be true, this

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mindset does not serve us. Instead, we must choose not to focus on our scars but to create a space in which we can show up and be courageous. We should reframe how we see and think about our scars and instead see ourselves as overcomers who are empowered. Whether it's sharing our feelings and emotions or being at the table and using our voice, in all things we can and will be brave. We are taking back the hesitation of speaking up because we don't want to be affiliated with the negative narrative of being seen as aggressive or rocking the boat. We are aware that we are here, deserve to be here, and deserve to take up space.

## Chapter 2

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### *Self-Care v. Self-Indulgence...Know The Difference*

**T**aking care of yourself is of the utmost importance. It creates self-value, while also setting the standard for how others will treat you. If you have ever been violated or hurt, it shocks your central nervous system. Your brain and body are then encoded and imprinted with the memory. As a result, if you sense reminders (also known as triggers) of the violation or hurt, your body will go into flight-or-flight mode. Many women have been walking around in flight-or-flight mode, always on edge or on the defense, which increases your cortisol level and induces stress. Having high cortisol levels for long periods can put you at risk of high blood pressure, stroke, and other health issues. So, how do you decrease stress and overcome operating in fight-or-flight mode? You first have to take care of yourself.

We need to sit this message right here for a moment. **You have to take care of yourself first.** Self-care is not selfish; it is a need. The best practice is implementing self-care skills for fifteen to thirty minutes daily. You can't show up for anybody or anything if you have not taken care of yourself.

I have this saying in my house, "If mama's not OK, then no one is OK, not even the dog." The reality of it is, failure to take care of ourselves causes us to pour from an empty cup. The more we do that, the more we lose ourselves in other people's issues. We are more likely to experience burnout and fatigue as a result.

Self-care involves doing things to take care of yourself for physical, mental, and emotional stability. Self-care activities are often placed on the

back burner, or we may struggle to make the time to pour back into ourselves. We may set personal, relationship, or career goals, then tell ourselves, “Once I achieve the next goal, I can rest.”

Sis, I am here to tell you again: Self-care is not something you need to earn; it’s a necessity. Even if you have to fight for it, you have to make your self-care a priority. When we look at the archetype of a strong Black woman, it is the ability to do and take on everything at all costs. Being tired, sick, or just not feeling up to par is not considered. So, as we work to debunk the myth of being a strong Black woman, we must prioritize rest. Rest allows us to refocus, ground ourselves, and make adjustments to our lives as needed as well as internally assess our well-being. It also allows us to promote and uplift the women who are coming behind us. When we rest, we elevate other women by giving them space to step up and share responsibilities.

When we are working to change the narrative of being the strong Black woman, we must change behaviors that do not serve us. How we show up and respond to others indicates growth and demonstrates that we are not who we once were.

James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, developed the Four Laws of Behavior Change:

1. Make it obvious
2. Make it attractive
3. Make it easy
4. Make it satisfying

Changing behaviors is a process, and it takes time. The process of establishing a self-care routine comes with practice and adjustments.

Examples of Self-Care:

- Reading a book of your choice for 30 minutes
- Listening to a sermon on a podcast or on YouTube (Purpose Place Church, Sarah Jakes Roberts, Brenda Palmer, Therapy for Black Girls) while getting dressed in the morning or commuting to and from work
- Taking a social media break

## Communicating Your Needs

Anytime I ask a Black woman in therapy to rate her verbal communication skills, she usually responds with “good” or “great.” When I ask about the type of communication style she uses to advocate for herself, I’m often met with a blank stare. Communication often makes us think about how many people we talk to throughout the day and for how long. However, we rarely think about *how* we communicate our needs and speak up for ourselves. There is a difference between being talked at and holding a balanced conversation. If I were to ask someone having an unbalanced conversation about what the other person said, they would likely struggle to answer. This is because they were talking to be heard and listening only to respond. Having a balanced conversation is listening for understanding while sharing your opinion without ridicule or shame.

As a Black woman, communication can be hard, because some of us tend to struggle with the internal conflict of not wanting to come off as too aggressive or trying to authentically communicate how we feel in the moment. We may practice emotional restraint while neglecting our thoughts and feelings. The aggressive stereotype often tied to the strong Black woman assumes that when we speak, especially about something we are passionate about, if even a syllable is elevated, we are mad. If we use our hands, we are mad. This impacts how and when we choose to communicate. From childhood, many of us were not provided with the proper language depth for expressing our feelings. We were raised by strong Black women who were doing the best they could. Often, our feelings took a back seat so our mothers and mother figures could take care of business. We stand on the shoulders of women who raised us, but we are going to do this differently. We are finding our voices and learning to use them effectively.

There is nothing worse than holding in your feelings or being silent about your needs. Part of self-care is being able to communicate what you need. A lack of healthy communication and self-expression can lead to resentment, destroy relationships, and negatively impact our lives. When we choose not to express ourselves, we give others the opportunity to speak, make decisions, and create narratives for us. I am here to work alongside you so that all forms of unhealthy communication stop today.

Before we get into how to communicate effectively, you first have to become familiar with the communication styles.

The Five Communication Styles:

- Aggressive—used to dominate or take over a conversation. It often involves a loud tone and is directed at our children, elderly caregivers, or people who we believe are beneath us (e.g., adopting a “Do what you are told” theme).
- Passive—often used to avoid conflict. This communication style may show up in an intimate or platonic relationship. The ultimate goal is to keep the peace, so we overlook issues and play ourselves small (e.g., “It doesn’t matter, I can fix it.”)
- Passive-Aggressive—often used when someone is attempting to avoid immediate conflict but insists on displaying subtle forms of aggression. This communication style often shows up in our personal relationships or within our workspace. We use humility with subtle combative undertones (e.g., we whisper something underneath our breath, just loud enough for someone to hear; we say, “I’m good,” but then mumble to ourselves, “you should’ve done it my way the first time”; using sarcasm, the silent treatment, or backhanded compliments to showcase displeasure with someone).
- Manipulative—subtle and initially hard to detect or recognize. We may use this style of communication when we want someone to do things our way. This style can show up in any setting or in any relationship. It is often affiliated with abusive or toxic family environments and relationships (e.g., “I rushed all the way home for this; it better be worth it”).
- Assertive—uses a balanced communication style in which the speaker appears to be confident in how they speak. They are also purposeful in encouraging others to speak and be equally involved in the conversation (e.g., “Thank you so much for sharing. I respect your opinion; however, I believe...”).

Now that we have covered all the communication styles and what they

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look like, we can recognize that part of developing healthy communication styles is understanding that words not only have impact but also provoke feelings. While growing up I remember hearing the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” However, words can hurt. I believe that when people hurt others with their words, it comes out of a place of hurt and brokenness. That’s why it’s important to recognize healthy communication styles to become a better communicator and model healthy communication to others around you.

Now it’s time to reflect and identify situations in which you’ve engaged in each communication style. So let’s reflect, sis.

There are 3 elements to consider:

1. Communication style
2. Event/situation where the style was used
3. How using this style made you feel

In what parts of your life have you recognized each style, and how did communicating in these ways make you feel?

### **Aggressive**

- Communication style

- Event/situation where the style was used

- How using this style made you feel

### **Passive**

- Communication style

. . . .

- Event/situation where the style was used
- How using this style made you feel

**Passive-Aggressive**

- Communication style
- Event/situation where the style was used
- How using this style made you feel

**Manipulative**

- Communication style
- Event/situation where the style was used
- How using this style made you feel

**Assertive**

- Communication style
- Event/situation where the style was used

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- How using this style made you feel

To communicate is to actively have something to say; however, *how* we say it (tone) is what resonates most with who we are speaking to. To engage in healthy communication, we first need to be clear on what needs to be said. This can get very tricky, especially when we are in the moment and feelings and emotions are heightened. In emotionally heightened situations, I suggest using the breath-of-five routine. Inhale while counting to five and exhale while counting to four. This allows our brains to process and gather information, while taking a pause to steady our emotions. The worst thing that can happen in a moment of communication is letting our emotions take over and communicating out of a place of hurt. When this happens, we are more likely to say really damaging things to someone close to us. Apologies are great, but they will never remove the sting of what was said.

As a trauma therapist, I utilize techniques that are rooted in the trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy modality. This modality is an evidenced based practice that assist individuals who are working through the effects of their personal trauma. In doing trauma work, the client is often asked to reflect on feelings, emotions, and behaviors. This increases the level of self-awareness and self-empowerment.

Part of trauma work is writing your trauma narrative that fully details the traumatic event from which you are seeking healing. This is usually where resistance comes into the therapy process. Some of my Black female clients resist starting trauma work to avoid facing unpleasant memories. However, the goal of the trauma narrative is not only to tell their personal story but to tell it from their personal perspective in order to *not* be defined by what was done to them; this increases one's ability to be empowered not only by the telling of their story but by their healing work as well. It is beautiful to see overcomers go through the process and take ownership of their story. Part of taking ownership is utilizing their words and phrases to communicate their narrative and advocate for themselves. When we get to this therapeutic intervention, I lean into the words my client uses and support and engage them by utilizing the same words and phrases.

. . .

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*What comes to mind when you think about advocating for yourself? What phrases would you use?*

*When was the last time you advocated for yourself? What did you accomplish?*

Advocating for yourself is asking for what you need and saying no to what you do not need. I wish I could tell you that self-advocacy doesn't come with conflict, but sometimes it does. When we advocate for ourselves, we are setting the precedence of what we need, what we expect, and what we will tolerate. We do this by not letting up on our boundaries to appease others. If setting boundaries is new for you, the people around you will have no choice but to adjust to the new you. They may not like it, but, Sis, you have to be true to yourself. If you are consistent, they will eventually get used to it or they will leave you altogether. In either case, consider yourself blessed. If people can't respect you, they do not need to have access to you.

I must also state that not all conflict is bad; sometimes being direct and standing on what we say is necessary. I call it being bold, loud, and right. In advocating for ourselves, our ask must be clear and direct. We must also establish personal agreements to hold ourselves and others accountable.

For instance, advocating for myself in a friendship could sound like, "Girl, I know you and your man are going through it, but please don't expect me to lie for you for any reason."

My personal agreements may be:

If she asks me to lie for her again, I am going to pull back on our friendship. In advocating for myself, I let my homegirl know that I don't like to be put in the middle of her relationship with her boyfriend. I then tell her what will happen if I am put in a compromising situation by her again and that I will carry out my personal agreement.

Personal agreements should be realistic and relevant. Now it's your turn. What does advocating for yourself look like to you? Write down a plan for self-advocating or reflect on a time you have advocated for yourself. Did you ask for what you needed and create two personal agreements for implementation?

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### The Ask

Personal agreements:

- 1.
- 2.

*How did asking/advocating for yourself make you feel? How can you continue to keep your personal agreements?*

This is a reminder that, as healthy adults, we keep ourselves safe by creating and maintaining healthy personal and professional relationships. Boundaries deter unproductive factors as well as shield us from factors that can harm us emotionally and physically. If you have ever experienced any form of childhood trauma, you may have internalized the notion of people-pleasing, where causing discomfort to or upsetting others feels wrong. This is where work is needed to reframe your thoughts to optimize your mental health.

Remember, everybody deals with boundaries differently. In implementing boundaries, we are limiting others' access to us because they may not deserve it. Granting others unlimited access to you results in them treating you however they see fit. That ends today.

So, what's the difference between personal agreements and boundaries? Personal agreements are set standards based on personal relationships with people who have high levels of access to us. Boundaries are set to create healthy barriers around all people, things, and behaviors we come into contact with.

### Healthy Relationships

Have you ever said, "I don't need people; I can do it by myself" or "I don't need friends; I came into this world by myself and I am going to leave this world by myself?" If so, I am deeply sorry for the hurt you've experienced by

another human being. Although you have been hurt, you can still heal and build healthy relationships.

It's unrealistic to believe that you can make it through life all alone. I don't care how hard you try, you need support. Life is manageable but very unpredictable, and we are wired to rely on safe spaces where we can talk and share our feelings with trusted individuals. When we don't have these spaces, we tend to internalize our thoughts, emotions, and daily experiences. The longer we keep things inside, especially our bad experiences, the greater the potential impact they have on our mental and physical health.

As a clinician, I often see Black women experience physical ailments such as body aches, headaches, and high blood pressure. Many of them mention visiting their doctors multiple times and undergoing various tests, yet their medical exams don't reveal any underlying issues. When I ask them about their daily lives, their careers, and their support systems, within a few minutes I can tell that what they're experiencing is a symptom, not the cause. The cause is a mental element of trauma or complex stress that has led to them leading a life in survival mode. They are always on edge with no one to trust. Because of that, everything is kept inside. The longer we suppress and internalize our issues, the more overwhelmed our central nervous system becomes. Illness begins to set in our bodies due to difficulty sleeping, which can lead to brain fog, muscle tension, or chronic pain.

According to a study performed by Boston University (2023), which has led the largest and longest-running study of Black women's health, Black women are more likely to die from heart disease, hypertension, stroke, lupus, and cancer compared to any other racial group. This fact is not meant to scare you, but to bring understanding and awareness regarding the importance of our health. We know that there are additional influencers to this statistical fact such as socio-economic status, family history, access to care, etc.; however, having access to healthy relationships provides the necessary support to navigate life, share feelings and emotions, and assist in identifying and acquiring the resources and skills to weather whatever storms life throws at us.

So, what is a healthy relationship? It is a relationship in which people feel valued and heard. You feel as though you can show up as your authentic self without fear of judgment. There is healthy communication, conflict management, and accountability. In a healthy relationship, you share laughter and inside jokes, and you are pushed to be your best self. You can celebrate one another without any ill will. It involves mutual trust, respect, and compro-

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mises. There is no power imbalance and, most importantly, there is freedom to exist independently outside of the relationship. In a healthy relationship, if you are going through something and seek outside support (i.e., therapist, doctor, spiritual care, etc.), your friend will encourage your efforts instead of trying to fix you.

It's okay to vent to your friend—trust I do it all the time; however, it can become very unhealthy when one friend is the only one giving advice or the only one always venting though nothing changes. This is what I call a hamster-wheel friendship—the wheel is moving, but the hamsters (or friends) aren't going anywhere. This may be because our friend can only give us advice from their own lived experience. When we keep applying the same advice, we'll see the same results and operate from a limited perspective.

In a healthy relationship, your friend might say, "I'm not sure I'm the best one to help you with this problem. You might need to go and talk to a professional who can better help you." We trust our friends to recommend nail techs, lash techs, and beauticians, but it's equally important to trust them when they acknowledge their limitations in helping us. If they suggest seeking professional assistance or express their inability to provide proper support, we should honor and respect their boundaries. Recognizing that our challenges may require more than our friends can offer is important when seeking the critical resources we need.

I love when my clients update their friends on their therapy progress. I can determine the health of their friendship by their friend's responses. If they say something like, "My friend told me I should talk to you about this..." that's a green flag. That type of external support helps my clients feel better about processing an issue or concern with me in a safe and productive therapeutic space.

There comes a time in the process of building healthy relationships where we have to be real with ourselves. If we seek to be in a healthy relationship, the other person has to have a healthy mindset. Some of us have formed relationships due to an unmet need, trauma bonding, or a level of proximity. You know the saying, "Birds of a feather flock together?" It definitely applies here. Take a moment to assess who you've invited into your space, who has your ear, and who you spend your time with. Are your relationships healthy? Do you feel seen and heard, or do you feel you have to hide parts of yourself? Do your friendships fill you up, or do they deflate you and you leave feeling empty? I challenge you to think about how you met your close friends and if they're still

meeting your needs. Just like seasons change, so can the needs of our friendships.

A sign of an imbalanced relationship is dreading their phone calls and text messages. If you have to mentally prepare yourself to go out with this particular person or are hesitant to share your major accomplishments with them, the relationship is imbalanced. An imbalanced relationship is an unhealthy relationship. We may think an unhealthy relationship involves only being mean or acting funny. You know how it goes. As soon as we switch things up, we are told we are acting funny or that we've forgotten where we came from. But demanding more for ourselves involves prioritizing our health and knowing what we deserve in our friendships.

You can still be friends with someone you've outgrown, but you have to be real about how you categorize the friendship. Maybe this isn't a friend who you can share your growth and life events with. Maybe this is the friend you only have small talk with or hang out with from time to time. Continuing to prioritize an imbalanced friendship will leave you empty and alone.

During my first year in college, I used to come home every now and then and hang with some of my high school friends. Some of them had entered the workforce right after high school. Catching up was a little different, since we were on different paths. I soon recognized a shift in our friendships. It wasn't anything bad; I just had to be real about the state of our friendship. While I was home on break, I just wanted to hang out with my friends, but they had to go to bed early for work the next morning. Our competing priorities caused a shift in how we made time for one another. I was able to make it work with some of them and not with others. There was no ill will, and we still speak from time to time, but we definitely grew apart. Rather than fight to hold on to our relationships, we followed our different paths.

Letting relationships go can be hard because at one point they met one of our deepest needs. I remind my clients that sometimes part of healing is letting go. Letting go comes with a layer of vulnerability and a lot of undoing of our thoughts and behaviors. It requires releasing familiar and comfortable things that no longer serve us while waiting to embrace something new, challenging, and healthy. The thing about self-awareness is that once you can recognize what a healthy relationship looks like, you will be heightened to toxic traits and toxic people.

Now that we have a clear understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship, we need to engage in a self-assessment to determine if we have

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the necessary skills to maintain one. This work is important because we often model in our adult lives what we have seen as children. How we interact with the world today is heavily influenced by events from our childhood. It isn't until we are made aware of our toxic behaviors that we can acknowledge and address them. Now let's delve into more reflection. Please answer the following questions:

- Do I have at least one friend who I respect and value?
- Do I make space for this friend to share, and is space is made for me?
- Do I understand and acknowledge that my friend has support and relationships outside of our friendship?
- When my friend's boundaries are made known to me, do I respect them?
- If my friend shares a goal with me, do I want to see them succeed, even if they accomplish theirs before mine?

If you answered yes to all of these questions, pause and give yourself a hand clap. The world needs more friends like you. If you answered no to two or more questions, it's time to do some self-work. Remember that self-work is for your benefit, and what you put into is what you'll get out of it. We know that we can't live life alone, and I'm a believer that if you want to be in a healthy platonic or intimate relationship, you must first be a friend with a healthy mindset.

Let's define what that looks like. Please answer the following questions:

1. What does it mean to me to be a good friend who contributes to a healthy relationship?
2. Is there anything blocking me from being this person? If so, what is the obstacle, and how can I address it?
3. Do I need to consider changing my circle of friends?

There is nothing wrong with redefining some of your friendships. Most importantly, you have the self-awareness to know that changes need to be made. Once you recognize this, the necessary changes will soon follow. Authentically assess your relationships to ensure that each relationship is

balanced and that you aren't putting way more emotional energy into the relationship than you're receiving. For instance, say each time you call a friend, she's going through it and you're giving her your undivided attention, time, and advice throughout the entire conversation. Then, whenever you need her, she is nowhere to be found or doesn't have time for you. Unfortunately, this relationship is imbalanced, and changes need to be made.

We need a good number of healthy relationships in our life because they provide us with a sense of love, safety, and accountability. Healthy relationships are built on mutual understanding and respect. Although each relationship requires different levels of access, it's important to get clear on the status of each relationship and act accordingly.

**Say it with me: We will no longer be bound by unhealthy relationships.**

If the relationship is toxic, stems from trauma bonding, or is emotionally unstable, we must create personal boundaries. If those boundaries are ignored, ending the relationship may be necessary. We advocate for ourselves by using our voices and displaying consistent behavior.

## Chapter 3

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### *Advocating for Self*

**A**dvocating for yourself happens when you are self-aware, know your needs, and can communicate them to others. We must be clear and concise when communicating our needs. If our needs or a compromise is not met, you are free to walk away. You can do that because you'll know exactly who you are and what you deserve. This is easy for some, but for others, their world perspectives have been tainted due to life experiences. So first, we must recall the boundaries and personal agreements we created. As a reminder, boundaries keep us emotionally and physically safe. Personal agreements determine the amount of access we allow others to have to us.

Now, let's go deeper. The need for advocating for self is rooted in feeling some type of way—maybe it's when we are overlooked, not feeling heard, feeling like we don't matter—and it's an action preceded by our personal feelings. When we honor our feelings, we acknowledge that we have them. It's my hope that self-advocacy will free and provide clarity for Black women who are told they're too loud and do too much. Please remember that your feelings matter. So, whatever you're experiencing, give yourself permission to feel it all.

**Choosing to ignore your feelings is doing yourself a disservice.**

While it's great to feel, remember that you do not always need to act on your feelings. Hear me when I say, feel what you feel but do not act in it. Feelings are fleeting, but they can also be heightened, which can cause impulsive behavior. Have you ever said or done something on the spur of the moment, but then, a few hours later, felt guilty and ashamed of your words or actions? Yeah, been there, done that. This is why I say, honor your feelings but don't act in your feelings.

The biggest flex and a real sign of maturity is to learn to sit with your feelings. This looks like feeling all the feels *before* responding to the person or situation that caused them. Sometimes we might have to phone a friend and ask them to hold space for us while we vent, or write out what we feel or record a voice memo to get it out. Do what you must so you can share what you feel in a way that's healthy, effective, and meaningful. I believe that a lot of "arguments and conflict have started because of hurt feelings and miscommunication. Once you have acknowledged your feelings, reflect to get to the root cause of why you feel this way. Is it something from childhood, a previous relationship, or a work situation from last week? Self-reflection increases our overall awareness of self and allows us to advocate from a clear perspective. After reflection, determine what you need to communicate. We self-advocate by communicating what we have processed through our feelings, discovering why we feel this way, and then identifying our needs. We advocate for ourselves by utilizing our voices.

### Steps for Self-Advocacy

1. Acknowledge your feelings (heart work: name what you feel)
2. Self-reflect to determine the root of your feelings (mind: identify the memory)
3. Advocacy (behavioral: what needs to happen next)

Advocating is rooted in healthy communication, with the understanding that we are expressing our needs to increase understanding with those who have made us feel some type of way. Once we put our feelings out there, we can watch how others respond. Then we move accordingly. As we learned in previous chapters, there are various access levels in our relationships. The relationships closest to us are the ones we tend to hold on to the longest, and

we often struggle with advocating for ourselves within them. This is because we are comfortable, there is shared history, and the relationship meets some, if not all, of our emotional needs. Regardless of the access level people have to us, we must advocate for ourselves in all relationships.

After we advocate, we show honor to ourselves while observing how others move. Do they respect your boundaries by protecting you from emotional triggers or harms, or do they fail to acknowledge your feelings and ignore your boundaries? These results give us clarity and the opportunity to make a sound decision regarding the future of the relationship. Is this a friend who demonstrates positive qualities and behaviors, or negative characteristics?

The need for observation is a good reason to pause and feel our emotions, but it should not be a place where we allow ourselves to stay for too long. When we operate within our feelings, it can have us making impulsive decisions and with clouded judgment. Being in our feelings also diminishes our ability to understand other perspectives. If someone or something hurts your feelings, that doesn't mean they should automatically be written off. We can acknowledge our feelings are hurt, feel it all, and then circle back to have a conversation for mutual understanding. Communication is one of the earliest learned behaviors. Clients often tell me they were never allowed to share their feelings as children. Our feelings are at the core of our human existence, so learning how to communicate them and be vulnerable with others allows us to be authentic. This can be accomplished while remaining committed to being our own best selves and experiencing emotional safety in personal and professional environments.

While doing trauma work with each of my clients, I create a customized emotional safety plan (ESP). An ESP is a preventive tool that can be used when you are experiencing overwhelm or emotional distress. An ESP does not replace professional advice. It is designed to ground you when you are in your feelings by providing practical steps for processing feelings and reestablishing self-focus.

### **Emotional Safety Plan**

An emotional safety plan is designed to protect you emotionally and physically. Emotions impact our thoughts, how we physically feel, as well as our behaviors. When we are experiencing emotional distress, it's important

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to give yourself time to get grounded, re-assess, and refocus. You are encouraged to hang this plan up so that you can see it and utilize it whenever necessary.

### SAFE PERSON:

Name:

Contact Information:

### WHAT I'M FEELING:

What am I feeling right now (name the emotion)?

Where do I feel it in your body?

### GROUNDING WORK:

An ESP is designed to settle the negative emotional distress that you're feeling. Allow yourself to get grounded by committing 10 minutes to sit, be present, feel, and process what you're experiencing. Ask yourself, what can I commit to doing for myself during the next 10 minutes?

- Close my eyes, breathe in and out, counting to 10 (repeat as necessary).
- Dim the lights and listen to soothing music
- Color or doodle
- Change your environment

This list is not meant to be exclusive. These are recommendations. Please note that different emotions may require different types of grounding work. Explore various grounding techniques to find the right fit.

### **Feelings Check in:**

What are you feeling right now?

Any thoughts that you need to share? Do you need to extend your grounding work?

. . .

### **Refocusing:**

Now that you are grounded. Identify next steps, what do you need to get done now in this moment.

Is it:

- Return back to work
- Prepare for a meeting

Acting in direct response to our heightened emotions creates chaos and confusion. Some are used to operating like this, which often looks like being loud, cursing, being hypersensitive, and becoming defensive. This type of reaction is rooted in traumatic childhood experiences. But, when you know better, you do better. Learning to regulate your emotions is not a skill that is developed overnight; it takes practices and awareness. When you are aware of your emotions, you feel them, but you don't allow your emotions to take over you. Talk about the ultimate flex.

An ESP can help you successfully regulate your emotions and achieve the following results:

- You experience heightened emotions, but you don't get stuck there.
- You acknowledge your emotions and feelings, but you don't act out.
- You experience heightened emotions, but you don't make impulsive decisions.

Now here's the thing: for many Black women, our feelings vocabulary needs work. Culturally, we didn't experience the freedom to fully express ourselves while growing up, especially while outside of the home. Our feelings ranged from happy, sad, and angry, and it was hard to express how we felt. Either we weren't provided the space to do so or we didn't have access to



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For your review as well as for a resource, I have included a feeling wheel. The feeling wheel is divided into three layers: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Colors are utilized to highlight the intensity of the feeling. For example, worried is in the Afraid category, and it's considered a milder form of fear. When we worry, our anxious feelings and emotions increase. Through using a feeling wheel, you'll see the beauty of being able to dig deeper into your emotions. I literally gifted all my closest friends a feeling wheel. Why? Because I believe part of being and operating in your authentic self is being able to identify how you feel.

Use the reflection activity below to reflect on your current and past feelings.

What does it feel like in your body?

What behaviors do you show?

Love

Sadness

Calm

Joy

## Chapter 4

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### *Identity Work*

**N**ow that we have spent some time together, I hope you feel prepared to open up to me and yourself. I would like to ask a serious question.

#### **Sis, who are you?**

How do you currently see yourself? Which areas of growth are you working on? As Black women, we are the only members of mankind who have been assigned identities by the world before we ever had the chance to speak a single word. \*Think about it.\* Depending on where you live or what family you come from, you are likely to hear comments such as, “She is going to be a teenage mother” or, based on just a girl’s cry, “When she starts talking, she is going to be loud.” Don’t most babies cry loudly? If your mother didn’t graduate from high school, people say about you, “She is going to be a high school dropout, just like her mama.” Regardless of whatever people have to say about you, it’s imperative to have your own sense of identity. So, who are you? How do you describe yourself? Go ahead and write your answer below.

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Now that you have described who you are, do you show yourself grace when you fall short or during hard times? The world is harsh, and the tainted perception of Black women came long before you and I existed. Even though most of society may think and feel negatively about Black women, we don't have to show up and confirm that inaccurate identity. The work you have done up until now has been to empower and uplift yourself. You know your value and you should be OK with showing up simply as yourself, regardless of who is present and who it may offend.

Being aware of yourself often offends people. We are not intentionally being rude, but when we know who we are, there are situations and people we no longer tolerate. Anytime I am doing a trauma consultation and I ask a client if they have ever been in therapy, if they say no, my response is, "You might lose some friends and some family members." There are some people who are only around you because you are stuck in the mess with them. But as soon as you remove yourself from the mess and start living life differently, they can't tolerate it. This type of growth often creates internal conflict in my clients because they struggle with the feeling of leaving others behind.

Sis, if this is you, I want you to take a moment to breathe. I want you to know that your value is not found in anyone else. If a relationship is healthy and they truly see you, respect you, and honor you, then your glow up will be celebrated.

It's on you, though, to know who you are so you cannot be rocked. Even if you have to work hard to get to where you want to go, you can stand firm in who you are and know that personal work is a process. People often ask me how long therapy is going to take. For my Type A personalities and people who want to be in control, I get it. But you can never put a timeline on your healing and growth processes. You may need to take breaks here and there, but you never stop growing. You never stop showing up as only you can.

As little girls, we were told to hide and to confirm. As grown women, we're shifting the narrative and passing the torch to the little girls behind us. We aren't scared to take up space, because we know just who we are. Even when they call us aggressive—that word alone irks me—we know that we are passionate. If they call us loud when we just want to be heard, when we feel like we have to work ten times as hard to get half as much, just breathe and assess the situation. We need to check in with ourselves to assess whether the way we show up is truly who we are, or whether we are choosing to show up

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in ways that appease others. If you are feeling imbalanced in your relationship because you are working hard to appease others, it's time to shift the narrative and reclaim your power.

I remember being in a meeting and, shocker, I was the only Black woman in the room. The person who was leading the meeting used everyone by their professional titles, but he addressed me as Mrs. Jackson. Now, I have never been one to say, "You better call me doctor"; however, in professional meetings, titles matter. We all had our nameplates sitting in plain sight on the table. Right in front of each of us. So there was no mistaking me for Mrs. Jackson. What made things worse was that other members of the group were addressing me as Dr. Jackson. So each time the leader called me by my name, I corrected them until they got the hint.

My reason for doing this was to demonstrate that you don't have to like me, but you do have to respect me. Now my unprofessional side was going in on them on the inside. I even texted my homegirl who was not in the meeting and asked, "Can you believe this?" Unfortunately, I have many more stories like this one, and I know I'm not alone. But one thing that cannot be taken away from you is who you are.

Yes, we have all experienced the hard parts of life, but we've also made the conscious choice not to stay there and not allow ourselves to be defined by those moments. We know who we are and what we want out of life. We have established healthy relationships, we are aware of ourselves and others, and our desire to please people is no more.

## Chapter 5

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### *Being Intentional with Self*

**T**he biggest part of healing yourself is believing and understanding that you matter. It's knowing that to heal and mend your relationships, you first have to be intentional with self. Being intentional with yourself is not to be confused with self-care. Self-intentionality means knowing who you are and what you want. It involves making decisions and leading your life based on your personal values, beliefs, and goals. This is the true meaning of "standing on business." Regardless of where you are and who you are around, how you operate doesn't change.

When someone starts therapy for the first time, we always discuss their intentions because a major part of the healing journey is being intentional with self by showing up in the therapeutic space ready, maintaining boundaries, incorporating self-care, and spending time with yourself daily. If you have ever experienced any past hurt or shame, being intentional with yourself may feel foreign to you. Our past hurt and shame may have shifted how we perceive the world and others, so we've learned to make decisions and operate on heavily influenced values instead of organic ones. This is why healing is a journey that takes time. To shift your mindset, you will literally need to redefine yourself and rewire your brain and your thought process. This is why assistance from a trained professional is necessary to get the best results possible. You want to program the right things into your mind as well as have a well-thought-out plan on how to navigate these changes.

I know mental rewiring may sound complicated, difficult, or even scary,

but believe me when I tell you it is worth it. There is freedom in self-intentionality, and the only way to find it is to make time for self in order to work on self. I have provided a few affirmations in the appendix to get you started on developing your personal morals and values. This is also a good time to look back at your identity prompts from the previous chapter to use as a guide. Remember, Sis, we are all growing and learning on this journey, so things may shift or we may need to redefine some things. Even if we are not where we want to be in life, as long as we are grounded in who we are, know where we want to go, and stand firm in our morals, beliefs, and values, we will have plenty of tools to guide us along the way. Below, I have provided you with definitions of each of these terms. Write a brief sentence for each that represents your intentional self. Remember, this is something that holds true about you that you can stand on regardless of the people, situations, or environments you encounter.

- **Morals**—principles or standards of behavior that are based on a sense of right and wrong and serve as a guiding point.
- **Belief system**—a set of interconnected attitudes and values that provide a framework for understanding the world, shaping perceptions, and guiding behavior.
- **Values**—core principles or ideals that are considered important and desirable.

## Afterword

Black Woman, I hope you have felt the love and guidance provided on each and every page of this workbook. It was written specifically for you. And if no one has told you in a while, I see you and I value you. What you bring to this world is needed. Don't ever forget that. My prayer and my hope is that you are able to live a purposeful life while protecting both your peace and sanity.

Remember, everything you do and every decision you make should be intentional, as you have learned that, ultimately, you are your own best advocate. The people around you and the environments you exist in influence you, but they do not define you. You have the ability to change, and it starts with an adopted mindset and ends with consistent behavioral changes.

I also want to remind you that you cannot do this work on your own. To be real with you, I don't want you to. I encourage you to find a licensed professional to assist you in doing your work. By picking up this book, you have already started the process of growth, healing, and restoration. There is nothing more I would like to than to see a confident, healed Black woman who knows exactly who she is.

I am forever rooting for you! May you feel empowered to go forth and accomplish amazing things as you live the life you deserve!

# Appendix

## Affirmations

- I am mighty
- I am bold
- I will not fear
- I can face anything that comes my way
- I am confident
- I love my self
- I am created for a greater purpose
- I have a right to take up space in this world
- Rest is not my reward, rest is what I need to take care of me
- I am a joyous woman
- What is for me is for me
- I am ready for what the world has for me today
- I can use my voice effectively to advocate for what I need
- Anything that has happened to me does not define who I am
- I will trust my instincts
- I will not lower my standards to fit in with the crowd
- I believe in myself
- I know that my life matters
- I think before I speak, because words are powerful
- I am not afraid to ask for help
- I have a purpose in this life
- I will stand up for what I believe in, even if I stand alone

## *Healing the Black Woman*

- I will walk in authority for I know my worth
- I will speak positive words
- I will be intentional with my self
- My boundaries keep me safe
- I can trust my inner self

### Ways to Practice Self-Care:

- Listen to music
- Read a book
- Walk outside
- Sit quietly for 10-15 minutes
- Lay flat and pay attention to your breathing
- Coloring
- Take a nap
- Spiritual work
- Journaling

\*This list is not meant to be exhaustive, remember self-care is for YOU. It shouldn't feel like a task. It is something that you should look forward to, to fill yourself up.



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## About the Author

Dr. JaQuinda Jackson is a trauma-informed therapist and passionate advocate dedicated to empowering Black women on their journeys toward healing and self-discovery. She has extensive experience working with athletes and high performers, addressing trauma, substance use, eating disorders, and the intersection of identity and mental health. Dr. Jackson brings a compassionate and nuanced perspective to every aspect of her work.

As a former educator and current mental health professional, she has guided countless individuals through challenges with resilience and grace.

In her downtime, Dr. Jackson enjoys spending quality time with her husband and best friend, Gavin Jackson, and their two sons Ellis and Rowan.

