

SURVIVAL IS NOT A WORK ETHIC

**A BLACK PAPER ON BURNOUT,
DYSREGULATION, AND THE
MISLABELING OF BLACK EXHAUSTION**

RESEARCH-BACKED LOVE LETTERS TO BLACK HEALING

What Are *Black Papers*?

Black Papers are love letters to our collective healing—research-informed, culturally grounded guides created by and for Black people. They center our stories, our history, and our liberation. Each paper honors the ways we have survived while offering pathways to rest, renewal, and thriving.

Black Papers are in-depth explorations on healing, faith, and liberation created specifically with Black people in mind. Unlike traditional white papers, which often center academic voices disconnected from our lived experience, Black Papers are written through the lens of cultural wisdom, clinical expertise, and a commitment to liberation.

This Black Paper, *Survival Is Not a Work Ethic*, examines exhaustion through a trauma-informed and neuropsychological lens, challenging the cultural and systemic forces that normalize overwork and self-sacrifice for Black women. It explores how survival strategies shaped by racialized stress, generational trauma, and systemic inequity are often misinterpreted as personal shortcomings rather than adaptive responses to chronic pressure. This Black Paper invites you to release shame, reconnect with your capacity, and redefine rest as a necessary condition for healing, sustainability, and a life beyond survival.

WHEN EXHAUSTION GETS MISUNDERSTOOD

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that does not come from laziness or lack of discipline.

It comes from holding too much for too long.

From adapting to environments that require constant vigilance.

From learning, often early, that survival depends on how much you can endure.

For many Black people, exhaustion is not simply about workload. It is shaped by history, expectation, and the quiet pressure to prove worth through output. Over time, survival becomes normalized. Pushing through becomes praised. Rest begins to feel unsafe.

And when the body eventually slows down, the story we are often told is that something is wrong with us. This paper offers a different understanding.

This paper approaches exhaustion through a trauma-informed and neuropsychotherapy lens, recognizing that the brain and body adapt to prolonged stress in ways that prioritize survival over restoration. What looks like loss of motivation is often the nervous system asking for safety, repair, and relief.

You are allowed to live beyond survival. Exhaustion is not a personal failure; it is often what happens when survival is mistaken for the only way of living.

THE PROBLEM: WHEN SURVIVAL BECOMES IDENTITY

Black survival has always required adaptation.

Our ancestors survived through endurance, creativity, community, and resistance in systems that demanded labor while denying humanity. Survival was necessary. It was protective. It was often the only available option.

But what protects us in one context can harm us when it becomes permanent.

When survival becomes identity:

- Rest feels undeserved.
- Needs feel inconvenient.
- Slowing down feels dangerous.
- Exhaustion becomes the proof that we are trying hard enough.

In modern productivity culture, this pattern is reinforced rather than questioned. Burnout is individualized. Exhaustion is moralized. People are encouraged to optimize themselves instead of asking whether the conditions themselves are unsustainable.

The result is shame.

Not because people are failing – but because they have been taught to measure their humanity by their output.

Many of the behaviors praised as discipline or work ethic are actually survival strategies.

Over-functioning. Pushing past exhaustion. Staying needed.

You learned this for a reason.

The problem is not that survival happened.

The problem is when survival becomes the only available mode.

A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS: WHAT EXHAUSTION ACTUALLY SIGNALS

From a nervous system perspective, prolonged stress without adequate recovery changes how the body functions.

When safety is inconsistent, the body learns to stay activated. Over time, this can look like:

- Difficulty resting even when tired
- Cycles of overworking followed by shutdown
- Brain fog or difficulty concentrating
- Irritability or emotional numbness
- Sleep disruption
- Chronic fatigue or physical tension

These responses are not character flaws. They are adaptations.

From a neuropsychotherapy perspective, the brain and body are always organizing around safety. When stress is prolonged or unpredictable, the nervous system prioritizes survival over restoration. The brain becomes more efficient at detecting threat and less efficient at settling into rest.

Over time, this can make slowing down feel uncomfortable or even unsafe. Many people notice that when they finally stop, anxiety increases, guilt surfaces, or their body feels restless rather than relieved. This is not a failure of willpower. It is the nervous system adjusting to a different pace after long periods of activation.

Healing does not happen by forcing productivity. It happens when the body experiences enough safety to shift out of survival mode and into repair.

Neuropsychotherapy helps us understand why these patterns can feel so difficult to change even when someone intellectually understands the need for rest. The brain is designed to repeat what has kept us safe before. When survival has required constant effort, vigilance, or over-functioning, slowing down can initially feel unfamiliar or even threatening.

This is why many people notice that rest does not immediately feel peaceful. The body may become restless. Thoughts may speed up. Guilt or anxiety may surface. These responses are not resistance to healing; they are signs that the nervous system is adjusting to a new experience of safety.

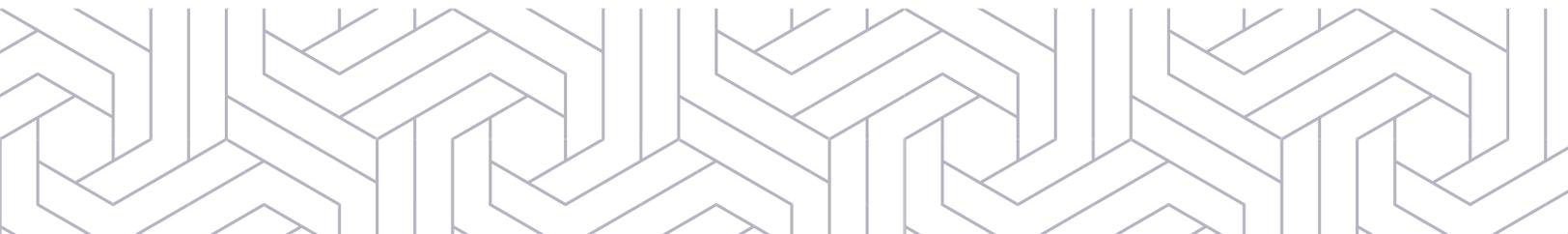
Over time, as the body experiences consistent moments of rest without consequence, the nervous system learns that restoration is safe. Capacity begins to return not through force, but through regulation.

For many Black people, this process is shaped not only by individual stress but by historical and ongoing experiences of racialized stress that teach the body to remain alert even in moments meant for rest.

What is often labeled as laziness, lack of motivation, or burnout is frequently the body signaling that capacity has been exceeded for too long without enough restoration.

For many Black people, this exhaustion is compounded by racialized stress, code-switching, and environments that require ongoing self-monitoring for safety or acceptance.

The body eventually asks for what the environment did not allow: pause, protection, and repair.



THE MISLABELING OF BLACK EXHAUSTION

One of the most harmful misunderstandings in both workplace and mental health conversations is the mislabeling of exhaustion as personal failure.

When survival is normalized:

- Rest looks like weakness.
- Boundaries look like disengagement.
- Fatigue looks like lack of ambition.

But exhaustion is often evidence of effort, not its absence.

Many people seeking help are not unmotivated. They are depleted. They have been functioning beyond sustainable limits for years, sometimes decades.

The shame attached to exhaustion keeps people pushing past their limits long after their bodies have begun asking for change.

And shame makes rest harder to choose.

CAPACITY IS NOT INFINITE

Capacity is not a measure of worth. It is a reflection of available energy, safety, and support at a given moment in time.

Capacity changes.

It changes with stress.

With grief.

With trauma.

With transitions.

With the demands of simply existing in environments that require constant adaptation.

When people ignore capacity long enough, the body creates its own limits through fatigue, illness, anxiety, or shutdown.

This is not failure.

It is protection.

Learning to recognize capacity before collapse is an act of care.

THE CAPACITY CHECK

The Capacity Check is not a productivity tool. It is an invitation to notice what your body and life may already be communicating.

THE CAPACITY CHECK

Capacity is often misunderstood as motivation or discipline. In reality, capacity reflects the current state of the nervous system — how much emotional, physical, and cognitive energy is available at a given time. When capacity is low, pushing harder rarely restores it. Noticing, adjusting, and allowing recovery does.

The questions below are not meant to produce immediate answers. They are meant to help you notice patterns that may have gone unnamed.

You might consider pausing and asking:

- Am I tired because I am avoiding something, or because I have been carrying too much for too long?
- What feels harder right now that used to feel manageable?
- When was the last time I felt genuinely rested?
- Am I pushing through exhaustion out of necessity, fear, or habit?
- What needs have I been minimizing in order to keep functioning?
- Where in my life does rest feel unsafe or undeserved?
- If I slowed down, what am I afraid might happen?
- What would it look like to respond to exhaustion with care instead of criticism?
- Where in my life am I functioning, but not actually well?
- What signs of exhaustion have I learned to ignore or normalize?
- When I imagine resting, what emotions come up first — relief, guilt, fear, or something else?
- What would respecting my current capacity look like this week, not in theory but in practice?
- If my body could speak honestly right now, what would it ask for?

There are no scores here. No right answers. The purpose is not to judge capacity, but to notice it.

RECLAIMING REST WITHOUT SHAME

Choosing rest can feel unfamiliar, especially for those taught that survival depends on constant effort.

But rest is not the opposite of strength.

Rest allows repair.

Rest restores clarity.

Rest makes sustainability possible.

For many, reclaiming rest begins with small permissions:

- Letting tired mean tired.
- Allowing needs to exist without justification.
- Recognizing that worth is not earned through depletion.

This is not about abandoning responsibility or ambition. It is about refusing to sacrifice humanity in order to maintain them.

CAPACITY CHANGES. WORTH DOES NOT.

SURVIVAL KEPT US ALIVE. IT WAS NEVER MEANT TO DEFINE HOW WE LIVE.

RETURNING TO YOURSELF

You do not have to wait until you are completely burned out to change how you move through your life.

Sometimes the first shift is simply recognizing that exhaustion is information, not failure.

Survival may have been necessary once.

It may still be necessary at times.

But it does not have to be the only way you live.

You are allowed to live beyond survival. Exhaustion is not a personal failure; it is often what happens when survival is mistaken for the only way of living.

And you are allowed to return to yourself slowly.

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About the Author

Kimberly Reese, LCSW, is a somatic and trauma therapist, speaker, and writer committed to helping Black women heal, rest, and reclaim their wholeness. As the founder of The Reese Collective, she creates spaces for Black people to explore liberation through therapy, faith, and community care. Kimberly is also the creator of the Black Papers series, designed as research-backed love letters to Black healing.

For more on Kimberly's work:

