



## **Emotional Tax:**

How Black Women and Men  
Pay More at Work and How  
Leaders Can Take Action

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## Emotional Tax:

# How Black Women and Men Pay More at Work and How Leaders Can Take Action

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# Emotional Tax May Impair Black Women's and Men's Health and Success

Black women and men have high aspirations to be successful at work, and outworking and outperforming others is the norm for many.<sup>1</sup> But what happens to the minds, bodies, and spirits of Black employees when unrealistic expectations are too much to bear—if, despite their hard work, they remain set apart and undervalued?

In this study of Black women and men employees, we found evidence of an “Emotional Tax” that is levied on Black women and men as they try to successfully navigate through their careers.<sup>2</sup>

**Emotional Tax is the heightened experience of being different from peers at work because of your gender and/or race/ethnicity and the associated detrimental effects on health, well-being, and the ability to thrive at work.**

Specifically, our data show that the Emotional Tax can deplete Black employees' sense of well-being by making them feel that they have to be “on guard,” disrupting sleep patterns, reducing their sense of “psychological safety,”<sup>3</sup> and diminishing their ability to contribute at work.

In addition to the quantitative data that support these findings, comments made by study respondents about their experiences at work depict various aspects of the Emotional Tax and its impact on their ability to thrive and succeed at work. Their observations illustrate the costs of feeling different at work based on gender and/or race/ethnicity—and the resulting decisions some participants have made, to accept things as “just the way they are” and “suck it up.”

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*“I’m treated as an equal until something negative about my race is in the news or [a] conversation. Then I feel the different treatment.”*

*—Black man, 47, middle manager, for-profit, construction*

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*“I love my job, but I have been told my superiors won’t promote me based on my physical appearance. I wish I had it on tape or they would say it directly to me....So many people still act like school children spreading their lies and rumors. It is quite horrible.”*

*—Black woman, 27, non-management, telecommunications*

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*“I work in a gas station as the regional manager...The men get paid way more than [the women] but I stop complaining since everything has been done already.”*

*—Black woman, 47, first-level manager, utility services*

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*“I enjoy [work] sometimes, and other times I feel like my skin color affects how I am treated. It depends on who I am around. I try to stay close to certain people and feel some anxious feelings around certain groups of white workers.”*

*—Black man, 30, first-level manager, for-profit, industrial manufacturing*

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Despite this reality, inclusive work environments can offer relief from the Emotional Tax. All of us have a role to play in creating workplaces where everyone is valued, heard, and has fair opportunities to succeed.



# Black Women and Black Men Want Similar Things Out of Life: Influence, Power, and Purpose

*“The Black experience in the professional workplace has not changed much at all over the years. It has simply taken on another face and attempted to hide itself even better behind shady policies and unique situations that ultimately discriminate against the socioeconomically disadvantaged worker of color... But you deal with it and move on. What am I supposed to do every time I meet a ‘hidden’ bigot or twisted company policy that has it in for me? Roll over and die? No, I don’t think so. I have a family to support and a destiny and purpose in life to achieve....So on with the show.”*

—Black man, 25,  
first-level manager, for-profit, retail

Despite feeling excluded at work, Black women and men have similar career goals.<sup>4</sup>

Black women and men want to:

<b>ENGAGE IN CHALLENGING AND INTELLECTUALLY STIMULATING WORK</b>	89% women	89% men
<b>REMAIN IN THE SAME COMPANY</b>	88% women	87% men
<b>BE AN INFLUENTIAL LEADER</b>	87% women	85% men
<b>OBTAIN A HIGH-RANKING POSITION</b>	81% women	82% men

Black women and men agree that obtaining financial stability, being a good parent, giving back to others, and taking care of relatives (e.g., parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters) are important. Although there are slight differences in some categories between women and men, both genders have high aspirations in all of them:

Black women and men value:<sup>5</sup>

<b>OBTAINING FINANCIAL STABILITY</b>	96% women	88% men
<b>BEING A GOOD PARENT</b>	94% women	89% men
<b>GIVING BACK TO OTHERS</b>	91% women	86% men
<b>TAKING CARE OF RELATIVES (E.G., PARENTS, AUNTS, UNCLES, BROTHERS, SISTERS)</b>	91% women	90% men

## ABOUT THE STUDY

Findings from this study were shared by Catalyst exclusively with *ESSENCE Magazine*, which featured it in “Battling the Burden of Success,” an article in the November 2016 issue.

The study includes a sample of 649 Black employees, 322 women and 327 men, including 19.1% non-management/individual contributors, 23.3% first-level managers, 28.3% middle managers, 18.2% senior executives, and 11% CEOs/business owners. Top industries represented are retail, healthcare, financial services, education, construction, and information services/IT.

## Emotional Tax Linked to Sleep Problems and a State of Being “On Guard”

Black women and men are aiming high, but the Emotional Tax they must bear can get in the way of their success. It is suffered by Black women and men in a few different ways.<sup>6</sup>

- 45% of those who felt different based on gender and race/ethnicity had **sleep problems** compared to 25% of those who did not feel different on either.<sup>7</sup>
- 54% of those who felt different based on gender and race/ethnicity **felt that they had to be “on guard”** (i.e., consciously preparing to deal with potential discrimination by bracing for insults, avoiding social situations and places, or taking care with appearance to avoid bias) compared to 34% of those who did not feel different on either.<sup>8</sup>

## Relief From Emotional Tax Can Enhance Black Women’s and Men’s Ability to Contribute at Work

Black women and men who did *not* feel different based on *either* their gender *or* their race/ethnicity<sup>9</sup> were able to contribute more at work.

- 74% of those who did not feel different spoke up about important or difficult issues at work, compared to 56% of those who felt different based on either gender, race/ethnicity, or both.<sup>10</sup>
- 75% of those who did not feel different reported being creative and innovative at work, compared to 61% of those who felt different based on either gender, race/ethnicity, or both.<sup>11</sup>



## Relief From the Emotional Tax Is Associated With More Psychological Safety at Work

When you feel that organizational leaders and team members “have your back,” you are more likely to feel safe taking interpersonal risks.<sup>12</sup> This form of psychological safety creates space for you to speak up about difficult issues, feel confident mistakes won’t be held against you, and trust that co-workers won’t undermine your efforts.<sup>13</sup>

Black employees who don’t feel different from their colleagues are more likely to feel safe bringing their unique voices to work—to have experiences that may lessen the burden of Emotional Tax.

- 54% of those who didn’t feel different on either gender or race/ethnicity felt psychologically safe, compared to 34% of those who felt different on either gender, race/ethnicity, or both.<sup>14</sup>

## Inclusive Workplaces Could Help Alleviate the Emotional Tax

Feeling included at work has profound benefits that can alleviate the burden of the Emotional Tax. You experience inclusion when you simultaneously feel valued for your uniqueness and you have a sense of belonging on your team.<sup>15</sup>

Findings show that inclusion is associated with reduced feelings of difference<sup>16</sup> for both Black women and men.

- Among those who felt included, only 27% felt different based on gender and only 39% felt different based on race/ethnicity.
- Among those who did *not* feel included, 49% felt different based on gender and 62% felt different based on race/ethnicity.

A key component of an inclusive culture is creating a sense of psychological safety where employees feel comfortable taking risks. For Black employees, this feeling of safety may help create the sense of inclusion needed to alleviate the Emotional Tax. A closer look at findings shows that:

- Among those who did not feel psychologically safe, only 21% felt included.
- But among those who did feel psychologically safe, 86% felt included.<sup>17</sup>

# Leaders at All Levels Can Take Action

Leaders—whether working in the C-suite, on the front-lines, as entrepreneurs, managers, or in junior positions—all have a role to play in mitigating the Emotional Tax and its effects on the careers of Black women and men. Leaders must take action to make everyone feel included, and not excluded because of gender or race/ethnicity. In this way, everyone can thrive at work and contribute their best.

## Start with the following actions

### ✓ Support and role model flexible work arrangements

Findings show that Black women and men regard taking care of family members, being challenged and advancing at work, and doing good for their broader communities are important. For all of these positive things to happen, employers must make flexible working arrangements (FWAs) a core part of their offerings. In flexible working environments, leaders recognize that what matters is the quality of an employee's work—not when or where that work gets done. Employees can be at their most productive and innovative, and they can integrate their work and personal lives in the way that works best for them, relieving stress and reducing conflicts. Prior Catalyst research has shown that everyone wants FWAs, including women and men, parents and non-parents, CEOs and entry-level workers.<sup>18</sup> By supporting employee well-being, employers can alleviate a critical part of the Emotional Tax.

### ✓ Have an honest conversation

Start by inviting your colleagues to share examples of two distinct experiences: a time when they were in a group (e.g., a work team) in which people felt valued, heard, and included; and then a time when they felt singled out, devalued, or dismissed.<sup>19</sup> Seek to learn from the perspectives of those who have different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds than yours. Be open and willing to

share your own experiences and viewpoints.<sup>20</sup> These conversations can create understanding among people from different backgrounds and help to find common ground.

### ✓ Focus on building trust

For honest conversations to work, participants must be willing to discuss difficult topics and sometimes experience a little discomfort. Foster trust by using strategies such as asking a colleague: "Can I count on your help to give me honest, constructive feedback if I use words that are hurtful or offensive to you, in the moment or later?" Open the door to conversations in which each person assumes positive intent of the others and engages in thoughtful listening, not just waiting for the next chance to speak. Your coworkers will develop trust that you will deeply listen to and consider their perspectives.<sup>21</sup>

### ✓ Speak up against exclusionary behavior

If you see exclusionary behavior in your workplace, say something (in the moment, or later). It may be that the person exhibiting the behavior does not realize he or she is being exclusionary—unconscious bias can affect even the best-intentioned people. Silence in the face of harmful behavior makes us complicit in it. Be the person whose action makes workplaces safe and inclusive for everyone.<sup>22</sup>

### ✓ Be inclusive every day<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, making inclusion a reality for women and people of color takes time. However, Catalyst research shows that the day-to-day experiences of employees matter.<sup>24</sup> If we are all willing to step up, we can create inclusive cultures where employees can take risks, make mistakes, and bring their best (and most authentic) selves and talents to work. In this type of environment, all employees can thrive, and nobody has to pay an Emotional Tax.





## Endnotes

1. Gillian B. White, "Black Workers Really Do Need to Be Twice as Good," *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2015.
2. "Emotional Tax," as described in this research, is one aspect of the cultural experiences shared by people across intersections of gender, race, and ethnicity. Notably, "Black Tax," or the feeling that you have to work twice as hard to keep up with your White peers, is one way that Black employees feel set apart or different at work. Our research builds on this idea work related to it, by acknowledging the heightened experiences of being different from peers at work because of your gender and/or race/ethnicity and the associated detrimental effects on health, well-being, and the ability to thrive at work. Joanna N. Ravello, "Intersectionality at Work: Black Women Administrators' Perceptions of Their Work Performance at Predominately White Institutions," (PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Boston, May 2016): p. 172.
3. Jeanine Prime and Elizabeth R. Salib, *The Secret to Inclusion in Australian Workplaces: Psychological Safety* (Catalyst, 2015).
4. None of these comparisons are significant at the  $p < .05$  level.
5. Participants were asked to what extent each of these goals was important to them on a scale of '1' (not at all important) to '4' (very important). T-tests were conducted to determine if there were differences on these scores between women and men. The difference for taking care of relatives was not significant at the  $p < .05$  level. The differences for obtaining financial stability, being a good parent, and giving back to others were significant at the  $p < .05$  level. Percentages reported reflect the proportion who indicated that the goals were "somewhat" or "very" important.
6. Among those who felt different on both gender and race/ethnicity, 49% were women and 51% were men.
7. A regression was conducted, adjusting for ethnic centrality and reported gender, of sleep quality on a composite variable coded '0' if participants felt different on neither gender nor race/ethnicity and '1' if they felt different on both. The composite variable significantly predicted worse sleep problems such that feeling different on both predicted more sleep problems than feeling different on neither,  $p < .05$ . Percentages reflect the proportion of people reporting trouble falling asleep, waking up in the middle of the night, and waking up early more than sometimes.
8. A regression was conducted, adjusting for ethnic centrality and reported gender, of vigilance on a composite variable coded '0' if participants felt different on neither gender nor race/ethnicity and '1' if they felt different on both. The composite variable significantly predicted more frequent vigilance behaviors such that feeling different on both predicted more such behaviors than feeling different on neither,  $p < .05$ . Percentages reflect the proportion of people who report trying to prepare for insults, being careful about their appearance, and avoiding certain social situations and places more than sometimes.
9. Among those who did not feel different on gender or race/ethnicity, 57% were women and 43% were men.
10. A regression was conducted, adjusting for ethnic centrality and reported gender, of speaking up on a composite variable coded '0' if participants felt different on either gender or race/ethnicity, or if they felt different on both, and '1' if they felt different on neither. The composite variable significantly predicted more frequent speaking up behaviors such that feeling different on neither predicted more such behaviors than feeling different on both or either,  $p < .05$ . Percentages reflect the proportion of people who agree that they perform a variety of speaking up behaviors.
11. A regression was conducted, adjusting for ethnic centrality and reported gender, of innovation on a composite variable coded '0' if participants felt different on either gender or race/ethnicity, or if they felt different on both, and '1' if they felt different on neither. The composite variable significantly predicted more innovation such that feeling different on neither predicted more creativity than feeling different on both or either,  $p < .05$ . Percentages reflect the proportion of people who agree that they perform a variety of innovative behaviors.
12. Prime and Salib, *The Secret to Inclusion*.
13. Amy Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," *Administrative Sciences Quarterly*, vol. 44 (1999): p. 350-383.
14. A regression was conducted, adjusting for ethnic centrality and reported gender, of psychological safety on a composite variable coded '0' if participants felt different on either gender or race/ethnicity, or if they felt different on both, and '1' if they felt different on neither. The composite variable significantly predicted more psychological safety such that feeling different on neither predicted more such safety than feeling different on both or either,  $p < .05$ . Percentages reflect the proportion of people who report 'often' or 'always' feeling psychologically safe on their team.
15. Jeanine Prime and Elizabeth R. Salib, *Inclusive Leadership: The View From Six Countries* (Catalyst, 2014).
16. Both types of feeling different were regressed on inclusion. Inclusion was a significant predictor of feeling less different on both gender and race/ethnicity for both women and men,  $ps < .05$ .
17. Inclusion was regressed on psychological safety for both women and men. Psychological safety was a significant predictor of inclusion for both genders,  $ps < .05$ .
18. Catalyst, *Flex Works* (2013).
19. Julie S. Nugent, Alixandra Pollack, and Dnika J. Travis, *The Day-to-Day Experiences of Workplace Inclusion and Exclusion* (Catalyst, 2016).
20. Catalyst, *Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace* (2016).
21. Catalyst, *Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace* (2016); Katherine Giscombe, Marissa Agin, and Vrinda Deva, *Building Trust Between Managers and Diverse Women Direct Reports* (Catalyst, 2011).
22. Catalyst, *Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace* (2016).
23. Catalyst, *Be Inclusive Every Day* (2016).
24. Nugent, Pollack, and Travis.

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