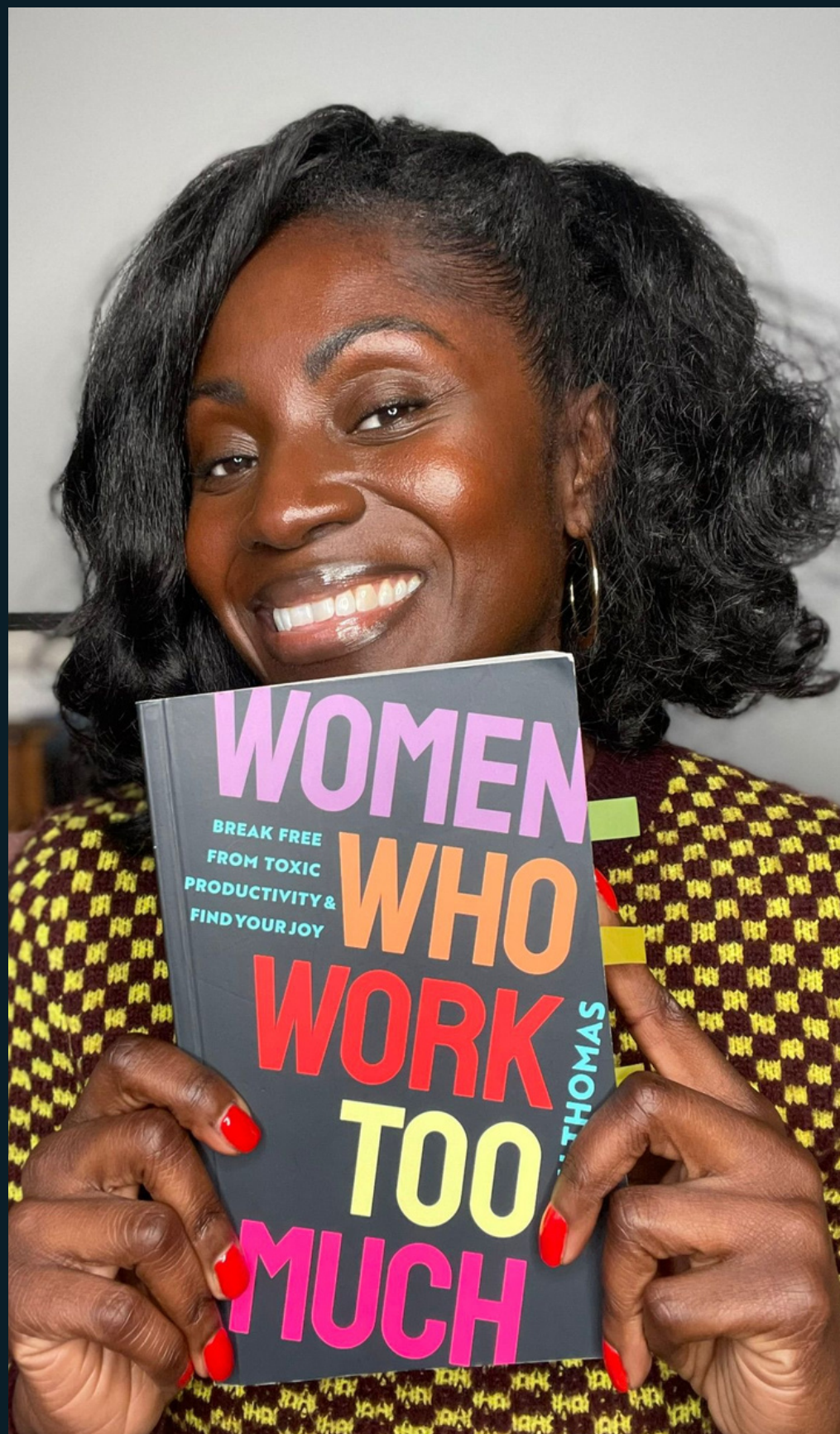




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My name is Tamu Thomas.

I am a lover of life and *the* purveyor of joy!

I am an author, keynote speaker and transformational life coach.

I specialise in helping ambitious women in leadership to go from over-working and under-living to uncompromising personal and professional fulfilment by befriending their nervous system and creating healthy boundaries.

I laugh at my own jokes, enjoy roller skating and believe that connection and belonging is the antidote to most of our challenges.

My debut book, *Women Who Work Too Much* will be published world wide last month.

WHAT WE WILL COVER

- Identifying the signs of toxic productivity and its impact on your well-being
- Exploring practical steps to integrate self-care as a non-negotiable part of your professional life
- Leveraging the power of mindfulness and body awareness to enhance productivity without burnout
- A movement practice to cultivate more joy

WHAT IS TOXIC PRODUCTIVITY?

"Toxic productivity is the unconscious, obsessive-compulsive desire to be productive all the time. It's when you build your life around work and forget the purpose of work is to make a living in order to live"

- Tamu Thomas, Women Who Work Too Much

Toxic productivity is a pervasive and often unconscious drive to be constantly productive, to the point where it negatively impacts your well-being, relationships, and ability to enjoy life. It's more than just a bad day at the office or a busy season; it's a relentless pursuit of achievement, often fueled by an internal pressure that remains even after goals are accomplished.

This compulsion is characterised by an obsessive focus on work and productivity at the expense of all else. Work shifts from being part of what gives your life meaning and a purposeful way to create the income necessary to meet your needs, life and passions to becoming the central pillar around which everything else must orbit. It is not just problematic but also detrimental to our health because it subconsciously creates an environment of not enoughness that leads to a cycle of perpetual dissatisfaction and striving.

Toxic productivity often leads us to detach from the present moment, ignoring the joys, relationships, and self-care that make life fulfilling. It's marked by several key signs, including:

- Ignoring Physical and Emotional Needs: Skipping meals, losing sleep, and neglecting health due to an overwhelming need to keep working.
- Guilt When Not Working: Feeling guilty during moments of rest or leisure, as if every minute should be accounted for with productive activity.
- Self-Worth Tied to Productivity Levels: Basing your sense of self-esteem and self-worth on how much you've accomplished in a given day, leading to feelings of failure on less productive days.
- Neglecting Relationships and Personal Interests: Allowing work to consume time and energy that would otherwise be spent with loved ones or pursuing hobbies and interests.

**At its core, toxic productivity is a
misalignment between work and
the purpose of work.**

While striving for success and achievement is natural and healthy, when the pursuit becomes obsessive, it disconnects us from the very life those achievements are meant to enhance. The irony of toxic productivity is that we inadvertently put pressure on work to meet our need for excitement, worth, connection, validation, personal growth and more which inevitably leads to disappointment because that is not the job of our jobs! That is our personal work.

Recognising toxic productivity involves acknowledging these patterns and the toll they take on our lives. This requires redefining success, setting healthy boundaries around work, and rediscovering the joy in being rather as well as doing. It's about creating a structure where work is a part of life, not the entirety of it, allowing you to live more fully in the present and enjoy the fruits of your labour.

A tropical beach scene at sunset. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and purples. The ocean has gentle waves with white foam. In the foreground, there is a sandy beach. Two palm fronds hang down from the top of the frame, framing the scene. The text "REFLECTION PAUSE" is overlaid in the center in a bold, light green font.

REFLECTION PAUSE

Bearing in mind what's been covered so far, what is coming up for you?

What is your relationship with (toxic) productivity like - do you relate to any of what's been shared?

How does considering work as part of what gives your life meaning and a purposeful way to create the income necessary to meet your needs impact your relationship with work?

THE AUTONOMIC LADDER

WHAT IS THE AUTONOMIC LADDER?

The autonomic ladder is based on Polyvagal Theory. It provides a simple framework for understanding our body's automatic (autonomic) responses to safety, danger, and life threats.

Imagine this framework as a ladder with different steps, each representing how our nervous system prioritises its reactions to our environment in a predictable hierarchy.



VENTRAL:

Safety & Connection

SYMPATHETIC:

Fight/ Flight or Mobilised

DORSAL:

Shut Down & Numb

This state represents safety and social engagement. When we're here, we feel calm, connected, and capable of social interaction. It's our nervous system's preferred state, allowing for growth, restoration, and connection. It's like being in a peaceful, friendly environment where everything is okay, and our body prioritises social connections and calmness.

This state is activated when we perceive danger, initiating the fight or flight response. Our body prepares to either confront the threat or escape from it, increasing heart rate and focusing our attention narrowly on the danger. It's the nervous system's way of mobilising our resources to protect ourselves. In a healthy environment it motivates us enabling us to take action.

In overwhelming situations where fight or flight isn't an option, our body may resort to the shut down response. This primal mechanism makes us feel numb, disconnected, or even hopeless, reducing our visibility or response to a predator. It's a last-resort protective measure when escape or confrontation isn't possible. In a healthy environment it helps us slow down and rest.

VENTRAL - 200 million years old.

At the top of the ladder is ventral vagal.

This is the state of safety and connection.

This is the nervous system state we are in when we are safe and life feels content. This is where we are flexible, creative and can see the bigger picture. We use power instead of force.

SYMPATHETIC - 400 million years old.

One step down the ladder is sympathetic. When we feel safe the sympathetic nervous system **mobilises** us, it gets us going.

When we feel unsafe we may go to the other end of the sympathetic spectrum to fight or flight. This is one of the ways we try to escape danger or the **perception** of danger. In this state we tend to use force instead of power.

DORSAL - 500 million years old.

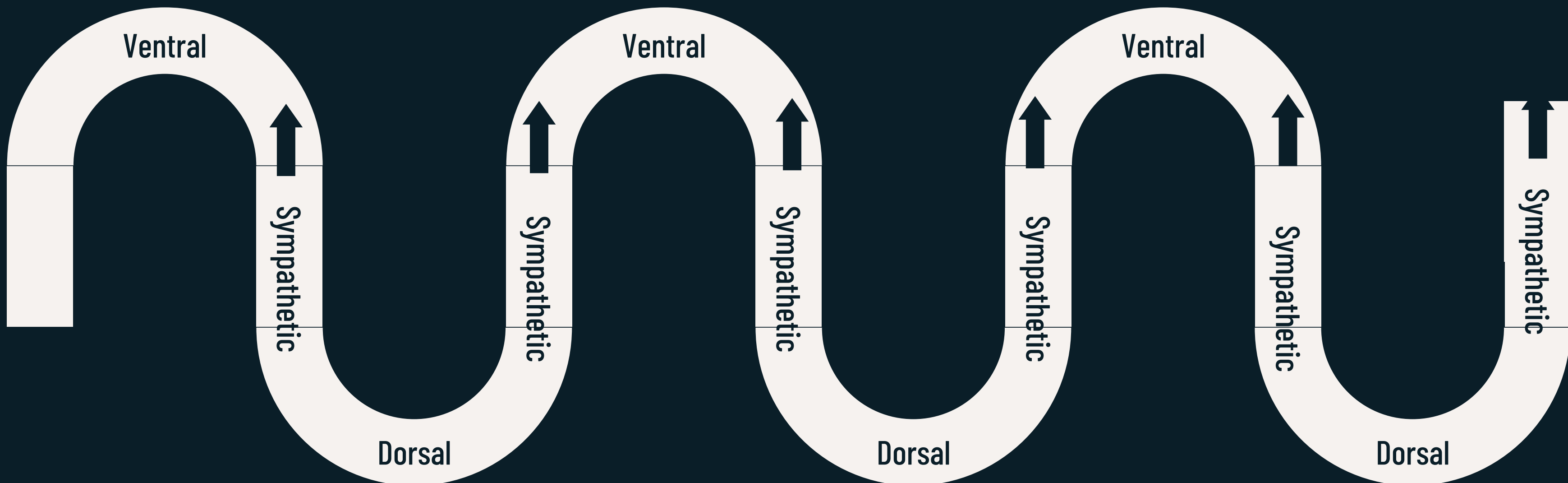
Dorsal helps us slow down, when dorsal is working in partnership with ventral it can feel like meditation.

When we feel a threat that overwhelms us so we cannot fight or flight we protect ourselves by going to the bottom of the ladder - dorsal. The function of dorsal is to immobilise and disconnect aka hide. In this state we lack energy and can't get together.

The autonomic nervous system works in a predictable hierarchy. A ladder is often used to demonstrate this hierarchy.

However, just because ventral is at the top it doesn't mean that it is better than other parts of the ladder (although it can feel that way when you get used to it).

Our nervous system is designed to be flexible so that we can navigate the different rungs of ladder.



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REFLECTION PAUSE

Identifying the Ventral State at Work:

Reflect on a moment from your workday when you felt particularly connected, engaged, and at ease.

What were you doing? Who were you with? How did this state of calm and connection influence your productivity and interactions at work?

Consider how being in this ventral vagal state supports your well-being and effectiveness in your professional environment.

Recognising the Fight or Flight Response:

Think about a recent work situation where you felt the urge to confront a challenge head-on (fight) or avoid it altogether (flight).

What triggered this response? How did your body feel, and what thoughts went through your mind during this time?

This prompt invites you to explore how stress influences your behavior and decision-making at work, and how you might manage these responses more effectively.

Understanding the Dorsal Response in High-Pressure Situations: Response in High-Pressure Situations:

Reflect on a time at work when you felt overwhelmed or stuck, for example during a demanding project or deadline.

Did you feel numb, disconnected, or unable to act (freeze)? What led to this, and how did you manage to move past it?

This prompt aims to help you identify when you're overwhelmed and explore ways to navigate such moments with resilience.

TOXIC PRODUCTIVITY & THE AUTONOMIC LADDER

Toxic productivity often stems from an over-reliance on the sympathetic nervous system's fight/flight response, where this state of heightened alertness and readiness becomes not just a reaction to immediate threats but a continuous mode of operation.

It is akin to using fear as a motivational tool.

Constantly On Edge:

The fight/flight response gears us up for action, essential for short-term challenges or dangers. However, when this state is perpetually activated due to work demands, deadlines, or the pursuit of success, it leads to a state of chronic stress.

This constant readiness to "fight" work challenges or "flee" from potential failures keeps individuals in a state of high alert, which can be exhausting and unsustainable.

Can't Switch Off:

The normal ability to transition into restful states becomes compromised. The body is tricked into believing that taking a break is akin to facing a threat, leading to guilt (shame) or anxiety when not working.

This disrupts the natural balance, making it hard to relax or engage in non-work-related activities, which are crucial for mental health and well-being.

Blurry Boundaries:

In an attempt to stay ahead or cope with perceived threats (such as job insecurity or competitive pressures), people continuously push beyond healthy work-life boundaries.

This overuse of the sympathetic state erases the distinction between work and personal life, making productivity a measure of self-worth and success.

Limited Creativity & Decision Making:

The fight/flight mode is beneficial for immediate, short-term reactions but not for long-term planning or creative thinking.

Over reliance on this state can hinder the ability to make balanced decisions or think creatively, as these require a calm and present mind, usually found in the ventral vagal state.

Physical and Emotional Burnout:

Prolonged activation of the fight/flight response can lead to burnout, a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion.

This results from the continuous demand on the body and mind to perform at high levels without adequate recovery, manifesting in symptoms like fatigue, irritability, and reduced productivity.

“Once we recognize that the experiences within our societal institutions such as schools, hospitals, and churches are characterized by chronic evaluations that trigger feelings of danger and threat, we can see that these institutions can be as disruptive to health as political unrest, fiscal crisis, or war.”

— Stephen W. Porges

Everyday institutions that are supposed to be there to educate, support, heal and connect us to a higher power can feel like a threat.

Now apply this to your everyday experience of work.

Let's focus on work a moment - what sort of things activate your survival response?

**Be Your Nervous Systems
Best Friend**

Partner With Time: Spend two weeks recording how long tasks take you so that you can:

- Ascertain how you actually use time.
- Identify distractions
- Start to allocate time according to your reality.
- Consider what you can delegate.
- Identify your patterns.
- Spot energy leaks/ blurry boundaries.
- Seek support that meets you where you are + supports your growth.

Self-Connection: Starting the day with self-connection by being present in your body and setting a positive intention primes the nervous system for a day grounded in the ventral state.

It cultivates a mindful awareness of your body's internal state, which can enhance vagal tone by promoting a sense of calm and readiness for social engagement/ connection.

Inspiration and Affirmation: Positive affirmations can influence the mind-body connection, encouraging a shift towards the ventral vagal state by promoting feelings of safety, self-worth, and optimism.

This mental state can help activate the vagus nerve, which supports calming physiological responses and social connection. The repetition of this helps to normalise you affirming and inspiring yourself.

Find positive feedback, testimonials etc so that your affirmations are based on things you have evidence of.

Journaling and Meditation: These reflective practices support the ventral vagal state by promoting introspection and mindfulness.

They provide an opportunity for the nervous system to rest and digest, enhancing vagal tone and promoting emotional regulation and a sense of internal safety.

I highly recommend starting and ending your journaling with gratitude.

Nourishment: Eating foods that nourish the body can have a direct impact on the gut-brain axis, where the vagus nerve plays a significant role.

A balanced diet supports overall health, including the functioning of the nervous system, and treats as rewards can boost mood and social joy, contributing to a positive ventral vagal state.

Joyful Movement: Engaging in movement that brings joy can stimulate the vagus nerve through deep breathing and increased heart rate variability, both of which are associated with the ventral vagal state of calmness and social engagement/ connection.

Joyful movement helps release tension and stress, guiding the nervous system back to a state of harmony and well-being.

Community: Engaging with a supportive community activates the social engagement system, a key component of the ventral vagal state.

Social connections stimulate the vagus nerve, enhancing feelings of safety, belonging, and mutual support, which are foundational to emotional well-being and resilience.

This can look like fortnightly lunch dates with a colleague, I've had a number of great zoom lunches.

Note: These practices may seem simple, but their power lies in consistency. Overcoming the initial novelty and maintaining these habits can lead to profound changes in how we perceive and interact with our world, leading to a more aligned, energized, and fulfilling life.

Challenge for the Month: Choose two practices from above to integrate into your daily routine.

Keep a note the changes you notice in your nervous system's responses and overall well-being.

This looks so simple it's easy to dismiss. We have been taught that things only have value if they are complex.

I think that's because maintaining this means you have to be consistent.

We talk about integration all the time, but it's incredibly hard as once the novelty has worn off it feels boring!

But on the other side of boredom is freedom!

Something that is very helpful to combat the boredom is community!

We are not designed to do this alone, we are the most prosocial creatures on this planet. We are designed to be ventral, so find yourself a growth friend!

Studies show that you are way more likely to grow when you associate with growth minded people and seek support that is congruent with you, your values and your goals!

**COMMUNITY MOVE
TIME!**

RECAP & TAKEAWAYS

RECAP

- Introduction to the autonomic nervous system and Polyvagal Theory.
- Understanding the autonomic ladder: safety, danger, and life threat responses.
- Identifying personal nervous system states and triggers.
- Practices for befriending and supporting the nervous system.
- Reflective exercises for deeper insight into stress and relaxation responses.
- Strategies for self-regulation and building resilience.
- The importance of nurturing a balanced relationship with our nervous system.

DAILY PRACTICES AT WORK

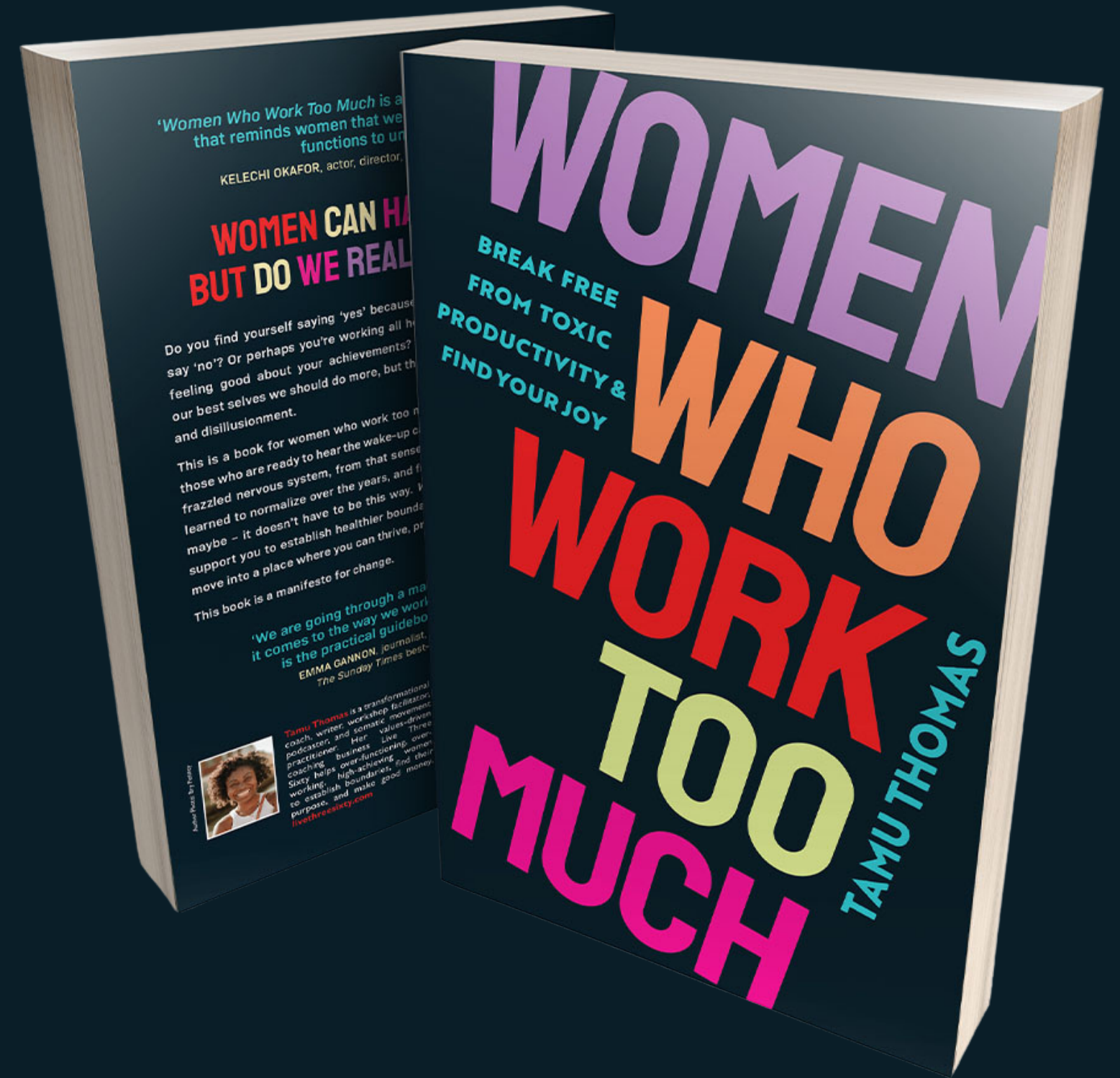
- **Check-Ins:** Twice a day, pause to notice your bodily sensations and emotions. Identify which state you're in on the autonomic ladder.
- **Box Breathing Exercises:** Inhale for the count of 4, hold for the count of 4, exhale to the count of 4 and repeat for 2 minutes.
- **Movement At Your Desk:** Progressive muscle relaxation, flexing and tensing each muscle group from your feet to your head.
- **Walk and Talk:** Set aside time to go for a walk with someone you enjoy being around.

JOY QUESTS

- **Nature Connection:** Play in nature invite your friends to play hide and seek - I am totally serious! You get three in one, nature, play and connection.
- **Share Your Joy:** Start meetings by stating something that has brought you joy today.
- **Social Engagement:** Engage in positive social interactions daily, prioritising connections that make you feel safe and supported.
- **Have fun:** Do things that feel good! Organise a quarterly games night, learn something for the fun of it, do the things you did as a child.

A tropical beach scene at sunset. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and purples. The ocean has gentle waves with white foam. The foreground is a sandy beach. Two palm fronds hang down from the top of the frame, framing the central text. The text 'KEY TAKEAWAYS' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and slightly above the middle vertically.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



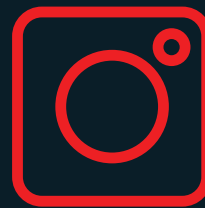
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