Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Sexually Abused African American Women

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Introduction

African American women have a higher risk of being sexually assaulted at some point during their lifetime than non-minority women. The event of sexual abuse or sexual assault can belittle the victim and cause them to go into a state of depression. This depressive state can then result in a diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, also known as PTSD. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is defined as a "serious potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war, or violent personal assault" (ADAA, 2016). Many African American women that experience sexual abuse have difficulty reporting the event and seeking help, and may thus develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This mental illness is underdiagnosed in African American women due to the lack of incident reporting.

Objectives

The objective of this review is to determine the causative factors that put African American women at risk for sexual abuse and how to help these women before their PTSD becomes more prevalent or severe. This review will also serve as an educational resource for healthcare providers or students to enhance awareness of posttraumatic stress disorder among sexually assaulted patients.

Review of Literature

African American women that are in a state of low income have a greater risk of being exposed to sexual abuse, which in most cases, results in undiagnosed PTSD. In a sample of impoverished African American women, 41% of those women living in a shelter and 21% living in a low income environment, stated that they were sexually abused at some point in their lives (Wenzel, 2006). After experiencing sexual abuse, African American women have several barriers that stand in the way of seeking help. Some of these barriers include a lack of transportation, lack of finances, family disapproval, and lack of knowledge (Davis, 2008).

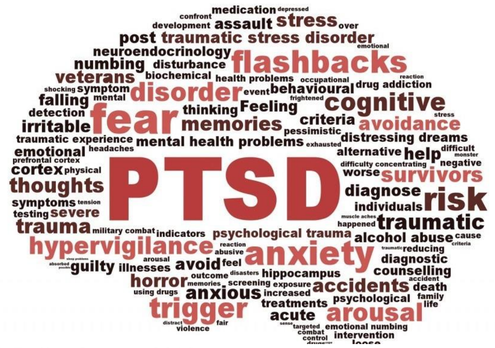
Review of Literature Cont.

Homelessness exposes African American women to several outside dangers. African American women living on the streets are more likely to be taken for human trafficking. They may be sexually abused while they are sleeping in an alley, or even in a shelter. Studies have shown that 25.6% of African American women are living in poverty, which makes these women vulnerable to sexual victimization, therefore possibly resulting in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (U.S. Census, 2005). These women are often left alone to cope, and may also develop other mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety. Some factors that contribute to the incidence of sexual assault victimization in African American women are that they:

- May live in a dangerous neighborhood
- May be homeless
- May have a low income
- May be in an abusive relationship (IPV)

(Jenkins, 2002)

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder within sexually assaulted African American women may also lead to suicidal thoughts, suicidal ideations, depression or anxiety. These mental illnesses closely relate to the human body's stress response and the women's feelings of self efficacy. Research has shown that many African American women have a low sense of self-efficacy and experience immense amounts of psycho-emotional stress, meaning that they lack confidence in themselves and question their ability to succeed. Psycho-emotional stress is defined as "a perceived lack, loss of fit of one's perceived abilities and the demands of one's inner world or the surrounding environment" (Chiappelli, 2004). This type of stress affects allostasis of the body's psychobiological regulatory process. This means that the sexually abused woman has lost her sense of homeostasis and she is going through allostasis in an attempt to normalize her thoughts (McEwen B, Wingfield JC., 2003).



North Dallas Gazette, 2016

Review of Literature Cont.

The sexually abused women may be trying to forget about their attacker, but they are unable to do so because the event keeps replaying in their minds. They cognitively cannot forget the tragic event that happened to them. This lack of allostasis ultimately leads to higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts as a consequence of stress and the inability to cope. Some of the manifestations of PTSD are shown when the body responds to stress. These manifestations include: anxiety, irritability, anger, sadness, depressed mood, fatigue, perspiration, facial flushing, increased heart rate and increased blood pressure (Chiappelli, 2004).

When it comes to treatment of PTSD as a result of sexual abuse, there are many different things that can be done, such as:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Counseling
- Social relationships
- Religious and spiritual therapy

There are specialized women's shelters that offer to assist women that are homeless or suffering from a crisis. The dilemma is that some African American women are afraid to admit they are suffering from a crisis (Bryant-Davis, 2005).

Program Model: Laura's Home

Laura's Home Women's Crisis Center is a place for women and their children in Cleveland, Ohio. The home offers case workers, support groups, tutoring, church services, Bible classes and mentoring. In 2015, Laura's Home provided 78,620 meals and 53,191 nights of shelter to 262 women and 392 children in crisis (The City Mission, 2016).

Potential Areas for Evidence-Based Practice

The potential areas for evidence-based practice are primary and secondary prevention of sexual abuse among African American women. Some possible primary and secondary interventions would include:

- Local churches that can act as a powerful social institution for these women
- Women's shelters (Laura's Home)
- School awareness
- Educate caregivers & pastors

It would be beneficial to implement additional awareness in schools, to educate children and to encourage them to seek help if they are sexual assaulted. It may also be possible for hospitals to partner with churches or women's shelters. Caregiver education regarding this topic can help with prevention or recognition of sexual assault among African American women.

Laura's Home is a great resource that is available in Cleveland. However, there are not many places that offer the things that Laura's Home gives to women and children that are suffering from a crisis. Although the city of Cleveland has a few homeless shelters and other food services, the only specialized women's crisis center is Laura's Home. Therefore, it would be of great asset to the city of Cleveland if more Women's centers were established (The City Mission, 2016).

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among sexually abused African American women is not always preventable. However, offering a safe place for these women would be beneficial for their mental health and overall well-being.

Recommendation

My recommendation would be to replicate the success of Laura's Home and have grant seed funding in order to expand more sites in Cleveland, Ohio.

References

References available upon request.

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