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Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:

Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

Fightress Aaron

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: African American mothers, postpartum depression, mental health

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

Goal Statement: The goal of this social change portfolio is to address factors that contribute to postpartum depression among African American women and identify ways to increase prevention and treatment methods through assessment and culturally sensitive support.

Significant Findings:

African American or Black women experience postpartum depression twice as much as white women. Historically and culturally, Black women are less likely to seek or participate in traditional mental health assessments and treatment. They instead seek counsel from religious leaders and church members. Secondly, Black women take on the burden of living with the symptoms of postpartum depression untreated due to negative stereotypes such as the Strong Black Woman. This stereotype imposes harmful coping mechanisms and increases the chances of developing a more severe mental illness such as Major Depression or significant burnout resulting in financial strain, parenting issues, and a lack of work-life balance. There needs to be both an increase in the assessment of Black women for postpartum depression and treatment that considers historical and cultural factors so that Black women can be supported during the postpartum period in a way that is significant to their unique needs.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps:

African American women are twice as likely to experience postpartum depression than white women. (Sandoiu, 2020) This statistic calls for the need to implement assessment and support measures that are specific to this population. Culturally competent mental health and medical professionals are needed to assess African American mothers for signs and symptoms of depression during pregnancy and postpartum depression after birth. These measures should also include assessments during all postpartum periods, including those pregnancies that resulted in miscarriage, termination, or adoption. The postpartum period is not inclusive to only live births. The CDC continues to work with local communities by tracking pregnancy and postpartum data through the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS). Utilizing the data from this program and specifically focusing on data surrounding African American mothers would help define goals and the need for support; the data will likely increase postpartum depression rates amongst this community. Increasing advertisement of the PRAM program by promoting in local Obgyn offices, Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) offices, and local hospitals will ensure an increase in awareness. Secondly, there should be incentives for participating. This may be accomplished by medical professionals speaking with mothers about the program's benefits, tracking data, and how the program serves them specifically. Third, an increase in collaboration amongst medical and mental health professionals is vital to ensure that African American mothers have the support they need to decrease the likelihood of postpartum depression and have support readily available for those who experience postpartum depression. To increase collaboration, medical professionals can refer at-risk clients to mental health professionals for help. The fourth component for intervention and next steps includes collaborating with doulas and birth workers.

Regarding working within the community, there are community-based organizations that train doulas and other birth workers. Doulas would serve as the first line of defense, alongside medical professionals who see African American mothers regularly. There's a saying in the African American community often stated by elders to "put eyes on you," which means just as it says, to look in on the mother to see how she is doing. It's vital that we "put eyes on" African American mothers, and collaboration efforts with doulas, medical professionals, and mental health professionals are critical to ensure that takes place. Finally, the last way to solicit community support is to involve the churches in the local communities. Religion is such an essential part of African American culture and history. Failing to utilize this source as an opportunity to support African American mothers would be detrimental to the long-term success of any program that is implemented. It takes a collaborative effort amongst government programs such as the PRAMs program, medical and mental health professionals such as doctors, doulas, midwives, therapists, and psychiatrists to ensure the postpartum depression rate amongst African American mothers does not continue to increase. Each professional has a role to play in a collaborative effort that works with and within the communities where they serve to address this alarming issue.

INTRODUCTION

Postpartum Depression Amongst African American Women in Alabama

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 1 in 9 women experiences postpartum depression, with African American women experiencing postpartum depression twice as much as white women. (Sandoiu, 2020) The prevalence of African American mothers

who suffer from symptoms of postpartum depression, often unreported and untreated, identifies a great need to bring awareness to this issue amongst minority mothers in Alabama. The state of Alabama Department of Public Health has partnered with the CDC to create the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), which is a program that measures information about the pregnancy and postpartum experience of mothers in Alabama.

As a participant in the PRAM program sponsored by the CDC, the participants in Alabama who participated in the survey reported that "10.6 percent of Alabama mothers reported they always or almost always felt down, depressed, or hopeless since the birth of their baby. About 51.9 percent reported feeling this way sometimes and on rare occasions" (ADPH, 2013). This information provides insight into the current mental health challenges mothers, including African American mothers, face in Alabama. African American women continue to be disadvantaged when it comes to mental health care and often do not seek or participate in conventional mental health treatment due to cultural factors and socioeconomic barriers. The 'strong Black woman' stereotype further influences the occurrence of screenings performed by clinicians. Historical factors, stereotypes, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic factors all contribute to African American mothers being more susceptible to experiencing the symptoms of postpartum depression and remaining untreated. There continue to be barriers to access to data due to most research performed locally lacks race-specific data. However, programs such as the PRAM project provide insight into the current state of maternal and mental health in the state.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

African American women are twice as likely to experience postpartum depression than other races, with 1 in 9 of all women experiencing postpartum depression. (Sandoiu, 2020)

Despite this alarming statistic, there is a lack of regional support to screen and treat African American mothers for postpartum depression. There needs to be consistency and an increase in screening African American mothers for postpartum depression. Adequate screening and treatment planning, utilizing mental health professionals of color or religious background, would support mothers actively participating in treatment. Undiagnosed and untreated occurrences of postpartum depression negatively impact women as they are trying to adjust to motherhood or growing their family. Subsequently, increasing the likelihood of mothers experiencing adjusting and achieving work-life balance also contributes to increased financial issues. Those experiencing postpartum depression miss work due to the symptoms. Lastly, instances of postpartum depression, if not treated can manifest and develop into Major Depression and Adjustment Disorders.

The main goal is to increase mental health support during pregnancy to decrease the likelihood of postpartum depression for African American mothers, including at-risk mothers, i.e., mothers with existing mental health diagnoses, socioeconomic issues, and high-risk pregnancies. Also increasing routine screening of African American mothers for postpartum depression increases awareness, availability, and accessibility of culturally inclusive mental health treatment options during pregnancy and postpartum. Increasing screening acts as a preventative method and decreases the severity of postpartum depression and experiences more favorable treatment outcomes. (Myers, 2013).

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

Several factors contribute to the likelihood of one experiencing postpartum depression. Prenatal care, financial stability, and family support are all factors that contribute to the

postpartum experience. It is vital to identify the risk factors to proactively develop a plan for addressing the issues. These various risk factors occur at various levels including the biologically, psychologically, family, community, and culturally that contribute to the instance of negative outcomes" (SAMHSA, 2021). In this case, the risk factors contribute to the instance of Black mothers experiencing postpartum depression. The Social-Ecological Model helps one understand how the different risk factors impact a Black mother's likelihood of experiencing postpartum depression.

Individual factors contributing to a Black woman experiencing postpartum depression include prenatal care, support, and knowledge. The medical system impacts the severity of the impact of these factors tremendously. The maternal death rate of African American mothers is 4 times that of white mothers. (CDC, 2020). One cannot address postpartum depression amongst African American women without acknowledging the impact the maternal death rate has on African American mothers. Alabama has the third-highest death rate of mothers in the nation, with 36.4 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, almost double the national rate of 17.4. (AL, 2020). These alarming statistics compound the stress African American mothers experience during pregnancy and postpartum. Research shows the majority of mothers die during the postpartum period. (AL, 2020). So, the individual factor of the Black woman's race impacting prenatal and postnatal care quality must be acknowledged and addressed as it impacts the likelihood of African American mothers experiencing postpartum depression at much higher rates than white mothers.

Having a solid foundation of what to expect throughout the pregnancy, birth, and during the postpartum period fosters a sense of confidence and overall feeling of being prepared for what is to come during the postpartum period. Mothers who have this knowledge during

pregnancy can better prepare for the postpartum period by soliciting necessary support.

(Mukherjee, S., Fennie, K., Coxe, S., Madhivanan, 2018) Family support during the postpartum period is vital due to the extended period of 6 weeks mothers wait to see their medical provider. A lot can happen during the 6-week period between birth and the first postpartum provider visit and family members are often the first to notice symptoms of postpartum depression.

Lack of social support contributes to the likelihood a mother will experience postpartum depression. (Pao, C., Guintivano, J., Santos, et.al, 2019). Peer group support helps decrease risk factors of postpartum depression due to moms having access to communicate with other mothers who are at the same stage of life as they are. Mothers may find peer support by hiring a doula or social media platforms such as Facebook groups specifically for pregnant and moms in the postpartum period. The great thing about Facebook groups as a means of peer support is that the platform is free and easily accessible. Community support during the postpartum period would be similar to peer support such as social media, doulas, and local mom support organizations such as Moms of Preschoolers (MOPs). There are many risk factors to postpartum depression and preventative measures that Black mothers can take to decrease their chances of experiencing postpartum depression.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

When considering the prevention of postpartum depression one must consider the effectiveness of theories that support lasting change within the target population and those who have a direct impact on that population. In the case of African American women experiencing postpartum depression, the Social Cognitive Theory is applicable to address the needs of the affected population while encouraging self-sufficiency which challenges African American mothers to

have an active role in prevention through accountability measures. The foundation of one's environment as a motivating factor for change and support makes the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) one to be applied to African American mothers experiencing postpartum depression. The SCT is defined as how one's environment impacts their abilities and how their abilities impact one environment. "According to SCT, three main factors affect the likelihood that a person will change a health behavior: (1) self-efficacy, (2) goals, and (3) outcome expectancies" (National Cancer Institute, 2005). The lineage of tradition flows deep within the heritage of African American mothers. As a result of tradition, history, and culture, there is a strong sense of not deviating from what was done by the previous generation. This creates a warped view of expectations and unhealthy coping mechanisms and in most extreme cases perpetuates harmful stereotypes. For instance, this is often seen with the 'Strong Black Woman' stereotype, which translates into motherhood for many African American women. Being accustomed to seeing their mothers and grandmothers do it all and as such, they do the same which according to SCT, is reciprocal determinism. Similarly, with regards to mental health awareness and treatment, there is a disconnect between maternal and mental health which makes African American mothers more susceptible to postpartum depression.

The goal then becomes self-efficacy that promotes and fosters an environment where change and proper support can exist free of shame or guilt. Programs such as the Home Visiting Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (HV CoIIN) implemented to address postpartum depression in the state of Alabama provide support to new mothers and acts as a barrier to prevention. The screenings conducted at the home visits are vital to mothers getting the support they need to cope with the symptoms of postpartum depression. "80 percent of mothers who receive mental health services after screening positive for depression experience a 25

percent symptom improvement when re-evaluated 3 months later" (EDC, 2020). Programs such as the home visiting program are vital in helping mothers get the treatment needed for postpartum depression. However, studies have found that African American mothers are less likely than white mothers to participate in traditional treatment such as therapy or take medication for postpartum depression instead of relying on religious support systems. (Bodnar-Deren, Benn, et.al., 2017) This is problematic due to the negative stigma in the African American community regarding mental health treatment. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that African American mothers would find sufficient support using these methods.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

Prevention specifically targeted to African American women is vital because this group is marginalized and has a history of disparities due to historical factors that continue to disadvantage. African American women experiencing postpartum depression twice as much as white women. (Sandoiu, 2020) Low-income African American women are five times more at risk for experiencing postpartum depression due to socioeconomic factors, marginalization, and discrimination. (Luke et al., 2009). From a cultural standpoint, many variables contribute to the difference in the prevalence of postpartum depression among African American women versus other races. Factors such as distrust in the medical system, a negative stigma regarding mental health and treatment, religious considerations, and an over-independence and the heavy responsibility of having to do it all.

When determining ways to increase cultural awareness with African American women, acknowledging these historical factors must be considered. The first ethical consideration is to

"respect the dignity and promote the welfare" (ACA, 2014). "The Strong Black Woman (SBW) is a race-gender schema that prescribes culturally specific feminine expectations for African American women, including unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and caring for others" (Liao, et.al, 2020). The SBW contributes to the chances of a mother experiencing postpartum depression. From a culturally competent standpoint, one cannot effectively support prevention methods without considering this. The acknowledgment is the core of ethical considerations and serves as the foundation of prevention efforts within this particular community. There is a lack of trust and stigma associated with mental health. Those who attempt to serve this population must consider all factors and act accordingly throughout their efforts to support. Another ethical and cultural consideration is acknowledging that culture does impact the client's experience and how they react to the situations they are faced with. When working with prevention with African American women one must do so while looking through the lens of life experiences these women have faced, contributing to how they can be supported.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

Postpartum Depression Among African American Women in Montgomery, Alabama

Not only are Black women less likely to receive treatment for postpartum depression than white women, but they are also less likely to even be evaluated for postpartum depression. (Kozhimannil, & Trinacty, et.al., 2011). Several factors contribute to African Americans' unwillingness to receive mental health treatment including stigma about mental illness, historical factors which influence cultural hesitancy and discrimination. (Hays, 2016). The main barrier at the institutional level for African American mothers being evaluated for and treated for postpartum depression are these historical and cultural factors, including but not limited to those

above and religious traditions where they are more likely to seek spiritual counsel than mental health treatment. Religion then becomes a part of the barrier to mental health treatment and support, as it is seen as an alternative method for coping. This leads to a lack of data because information regarding the mother and symptoms is not tracked within religious settings.

Culturally competent clinicians must "assess the degree to which historical events, current issues, and power, privilege, and oppression contribute to the presenting problems expressed by privileged and marginalized clients" (Ratts, 2016). In doing so one must acknowledge the historical factors that are present in Montgomery, Alabama. Montgomery is in the Bible Belt, which is strong in religious history and practice. This can be an opportunity for advocacy and partnership with local organizations to address the prevention and treatment methods for Black women with postpartum depression or at risk for postpartum depression.

The African American community has celebrated the strength and resilience of African American women, encouraging unhealthy independence which has resulted in the Strong Black Woman stereotype many African American women shy away from. This is especially important in the postpartum period. A lack of support is one of the factors that contribute to postpartum depression amongst African American women. The radical notion that a woman needs to be supported during one of the most vulnerable times, after childbirth, should not be as such. Still, unfortunately, it is the reality within the African American community. This reality contributes to barriers such as these within the community.

At an institutional level change promoted from within the church would be the best approach due to the heavy influence religion has within the African American community. Efforts from within the church would promote prevention programs, educate mothers about the risks of postpartum depression and treatment options available within the community. Mental

health professionals could utilize the opportunity to partner with local religious leaders to join efforts to reach mothers in the community. This would transcend within other institutions such as the school and community centers. Change from within the church would allow reaching many members of the target population who are also community members. Many public officials utilize the opportunity to reach the community, so the church would prove to be an effective means for advocacy efforts with regards to public policy. There are also opportunities for prominent female African American leaders within the church, community, and political sector to promote advocacy and prevention efforts to mothers within the community. Also partnering with the church and local community centers to facilitate postpartum support groups that meet at the church and are facilitated by local mental health professionals. All of these are ways to ensure inclusion and collaboration within the community as a whole.

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