



Introduction

Post-secondary education students are at higher risk for mental health problems (Papaconstantinou et al, 2017). African American women are at higher risk for PTSD due to exposure to trauma, compared to women of other ethnicities (Hauff, 2017). Biopsychosocial factors contribute to a greater risk for depression in African American women and are least likely receive help from healthcare providers (Perez et al, 2021). There is increased psychological suffering faced by African American women due to the intersectionality of race and gender (Perez et al., 2021). There is lack of research on the impact of PTSD on African American women in Post-Secondary Education.

Methods

Participants included 334 PSE students (37% male, 53% female, 10% other; 58% white vs 42% non-white; 80% undergraduate vs. 20% graduate/med/law students) screening positive for PTSD (PCL-5>=33 on PCL-5). 28 (8.3%) African American women's responses were analyzed using grounded theory. Four open-ended questions were asked, and themes were created.

Results

1. Compared to people your age, what educational/carrier barriers do you face?

6 people reported being overwhelmed, 5 reported struggles due to PTSD. Other themes emerged were financial stressors, feeling they are behind and difficulty in forming social connections.

Theme: Overwhelm and financial stressors

- "Finishing my work on time and staying on task due to many things going on"
- "Expectations of performance, experience, support from family"
- "Underpaid"

Theme: Struggle due to PTSD

- "The barrier with dealing with PTSD while trying to pursue the career I want. It's not an easy process considering some days I'm "ok" other days I can't even manage to get out of bed due to a dream I may have had about my trauma."

Theme: Difficulty forming social connections

- "Difficulties socializing with others, which makes it hard to collaborate and network."

2. If you could have ONE symptom or feature caused by mental health go away, which one would it be?

11 people reported depression, 8 reported anxiety, including some reporting both. Other themes were insomnia, nightmares and lack of motivation

Theme: Depression

- "Depression", "feeling lonely and sad", "Lack of motivation or energy"

Theme: Anxiety

- "Anxiety", "panic attacks", "insomnia", "nightmares", "intrusive thoughts"

3. If you have experienced trauma (i.e., abuse, accidents, violence, traumatic losses), what is the most important thing that helps you manage symptoms?

13 reported self-care (therapy, hobbies) and social support, 8 reported avoiding the concerns, and 3 reported spirituality.

Theme: Avoidance

- "staying to myself", "ignoring them", "I prefer not think about it and I kinda shut out those things", "Staying busy to control emotions or shut out emotions and memories", "isolation"

Theme: Self-care (therapy, hobbies), social support and spirituality

- "Support system", "therapy", "Breathing exercise", "physical exercise", "writing", "music", "meditation, yoga", getting enough sleep", praying

4. In your opinion, what services do college students with PTSD need to succeed in their education?

19 people reported mental health services and psychoeducation to professors, 12 reported support (support groups, peer support, support from staff and faculty) and accommodations

Theme: Mental health services and psychoeducation to professors

- "Emotional and physical mental support", "On-campus counseling", "Workshops on how to manage PTSD and other disorders"
- "Support from faculty members to help students with trauma exposure, professors need a greater understanding of how trauma manifests itself in learners and they also need to pay greater attention to learners as whole persons with physical, emotional, and cognitive needs."

Theme: Support and accommodations

- "help in finding outpatient psychiatric services", "Offering safe spaces and having supportive staff"
- "Better support when it comes to school-work and timely completion", "flexible deadlines, alternative class model", "extended due-dates for assignments"

Discussion

Results showed that African American women felt overwhelmed and struggled due to PTSD, which acted as a barrier in their education. Some symptoms reported were anxiety, depression, insomnia, nightmares, lack of motivation, panic attacks and intrusive thoughts. Some have been managing their symptoms through therapy, self-care, hobbies, spirituality, and social support, while some have been avoiding problems or thoughts. They reported that mental health services, support from staff and professors, accommodations, and psychoeducation to professors can help them succeed in their education. As biopsychosocial factors play a role in psychological distress for African American women (Perez et al., 2021), some interventions can include increasing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts such as educating staff and professors about the systemic and social impact on African American women and families that act as barriers in their education, and lead to trauma and PTSD. Role of intersection of race and gender in trauma and PTSD symptoms should also be taught. Educating and hiring more African American women in the education system can help such as staff, students, faculty and counselors. Systems can be created to regularly check on students about their mental health, barriers they face, and appropriate support services and accommodations can be provided. Workshops can be provided to students each semester to manage mental health symptoms. Using diversity and equity lens rather than equality lens, in psychoeducation, accommodations and counseling services would be helpful. As part of inclusion, African American women should be included in developing strategies and policies that would help in managing symptoms of PTSD and developing preventive measures. Additionally, healthcare services should be made more accessible for African American women and their families. Sample size for this study was small. Further research can be conducted focusing on African American women and how PTSD impacts them.

Selected References

- Papaconstantinou, E., Smith, K., Côté, P., Taylor-Vaisey, A., & Shearer, H. (2017). Sleep patterns and associated risk factors for mental health symptoms in students pursuing post-secondary education: a systematic review. *Sleep Medicine, 40*, e251–e251.
- Hauff, N. J., Fry-McComish, J., & Chiodo, L. M. (2017). Cumulative trauma and partner conflict predict post-traumatic stress disorder in postpartum African-American women. *Journal of Clinical Nursing, 26*(15-16), 2372–2383.
- Perez, N. B., Lanier, Y., & Squires, A. (2021). Inequities along the Depression Care Cascade in African American Women: An Integrative Review. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 42*(8), 720–729.