



Operating Under Resilience Project: Researching Stress and Emotion Management for African American Women with Hypertension During COVID-19 Pandemic

The Operating Under Resilience (OUR) Project, a research study in the Ohio State University College of Nursing, is looking at the topic of stress and emotion management for Black and African American women. Specifically, Black and African American women with hypertension in a COVID-19 social distancing society. Managed by Dr. Kathy Wright, assistant professor at the College of Nursing, the project is a nurse and dietician-led, web-based health education program. It aims to provide instruction on accurate home blood pressure monitoring, mindfulness awareness, healthy eating, and interpersonal communication skills for the target population dealing with stressors of experiencing hypertension amid a global pandemic. With a background in geriatric mental health and minority mental health, Dr. Wright has focused her current work on cardiovascular disease management through management of blood pressure, chronic stress, and brain health in African American people across the lifespan. Through this study, her team of experts examined the cognitive markers of stress by not only gathering information about participants' experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to stress and how they manage blood pressure, but also doing a detailed cognitive examination with them. Dr. Wright noted that education on blood pressure management for this population is particularly important, because poor blood pressure management in middle age has shown to lead to increased risk in developing dementia later in life.

Project Background: Securing Funding and Prioritizing Representation

After the death of George Floyd in 2020, The Ohio State University designated funding for racial justice. The Seed Fund for Racial Justice is a program that seeks to develop exploratory research approaches and creative ideas that will help contribute to the elimination of racism and solve its underlying causes and consequences in their community. Dr. Wright and her team were awarded funding for the OUR Project at the end of 2020.

“I chose something under the area of health disparities and health inequities by addressing the inequity of hypertension and cardiovascular disease among African American women, because we have the highest rates of cardiovascular disease and

highest rates of stroke. I saw recently from the National Institute of Health, that middle aged African American women have the fastest rate of unintended suicides. So, it's all coming to a head, the stress that we've been through, through our lifetime, and now compounded by the pandemic itself." Dr. Wright shared.

She explained that she submitted her proposal to do an intervention focused study to address stress and emotion management in African American women with hypertension during the pandemic. Her motivation for examining African American women is not only due to the high rates of cardiovascular disease, but also because intervention research and programs are often not tailored or designed to appeal to African American women. Dr. Wright advised that "COVID-19 is an additional stressor Black/African American women have to deal with that may interfere with hypertension self-care management."

Dr. Wright deeply understands how important representation is in research. She stated, "One thing that I try to do in all my intervention studies is to have people involved who look like the people that we are providing the intervention for. Many of my research assistants are of the same race as myself, because I think it's important to have that collaboration."

Project Details

The OUR Project includes 17 participants from across Ohio and includes four components. The first component is a four-week virtual intervention that begins with a registered dietician, Dr. Ingrid Adams. Dr. Adams introduces her tailored dietary approach to prevent hypertension in the African American community, including the incorporation of foods that are traditional to the African American diet, and foods that the participants enjoy eating. "Not only focusing on *what* foods, but how you prepare foods in ways that are heart healthy and brain healthy, that you can share in gatherings or during meals with family. As well as incorporating the mindfulness component of eating, and being mindful of what you eat, how much you eat, and why you're eating," Dr. Wright detailed.

The second component delves more deeply into the management of blood pressure, primarily focused on accurately taking a blood pressure measurement. Dr. Wright noted that the lack of knowledge around properly taking one's blood pressure is a common issue. She shared that finding a properly fitting cuff for the measurement remains a challenge because many monitors do not account for people who are obese and overweight, a common issue in the project's target population.

The second session also includes a stress management component. Participants are coached on creating an individualized "media diet", a practice that encourages

participants to reduce the amount of time spent consuming media that can often give us a false sense of reality and influence. The program instead encourages participants to focus on what they can control for themselves, a real, tangible form of self-care.

The third component of the OUR Project focuses on stress and emotion management through learning interpersonal skills. Emotion management includes being able to partner with health care professionals, sharing emotions and concerns in an open, honest, and sometimes vulnerable way. Additionally, it includes effectively communicating needs and wants to family and friends. Dr. Wright explains that oftentimes, Black and African American women feel a sense of responsibility to take care of others, often at the expense of taking care of themselves, which results in high amounts of stress that lead to poor health outcomes. One strategy Dr. Wright has implemented in this stress and emotion management component is the RAIN acronym.

- **R**ecognize what is going on
- **A**llow the experience to just be there, rather than judging your emotions
- **I**nvestigate with kindness, and
- **N**atural awareness that comes from identifying with the experience

The final component of the project is communication based, which has been very powerful for participants. They share concrete examples of how they manage stress and discuss the importance of sleep. “We talk about the sleep lifestyle,” Dr. Wright explains. “You are preparing for sleep from the time you wake up. What goes on during the day affects how you are going to sleep at night. Those who experience sleep problems are more likely to experience high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and obesity.”

COVID-19 has negatively affected African American women’s hypertension management and heart health in many ways that the general public and medical community may not necessarily think of. Dr. Wright noted that one of, if not the most prominent issue she is seeing in participants is loneliness. “When people are lonely, they don’t take as good of care for themselves.” When participants feel lonely, they do not engage in healthy behaviors such as exercise or physical activity, which is vital to maintaining heart health. This project is showing that holding space for these types of conversations and collaborations are powerful, and encourage participants to prioritize their own health and well-being.

While this is an ongoing research study, this cohort will conclude their participation in June of 2022, and a new cohort will begin in March of 2022. Dr. Wright is currently working on a final report for the Seed Fund for Racial Justice grant to determine the

resources that will be available for dissemination from this project for prehypertensive African American women.

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Learn more about Dr. Wright [here](#).

Learn more about Dr. Wright's research on blood pressure self-management [here](#).