

Mental Health of Unemployed African American Mothers: Report of a pilot intervention

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Introduction

- The World Health Organization classifies employment as a social determinant of health.
- Research suggests that unemployment places considerable economic & mental health strains on individuals and families. Unemployment is associated with mental health symptoms and illnesses, such as depression and anxiety.¹
- Since unemployment data have been kept, African Americans have had higher rates of unemployment compared to other racial/ethnic groups in the United States; with unemployment 2-3 times the national average.²
- In St. Louis County, African women have an unemployment rate of 8.6% compared to 3.8 for white women.³
- African American women are increasingly heads of household. In St. Louis County, 50% of African American families are headed by women.³
- Given the high percentage of African American women heading families and the higher unemployment rate among these women, it is important to understand how unemployment affects their mental health.
- In addition, data suggest that African American women are less likely to seek or receive mental health treatment; signaling the need for interventions.⁴

Purpose: To investigate levels of stress experienced by unemployed African American mothers and whether educational materials about the effects of stress related to unemployment improved their recognition of stress, stress management and knowledge of when to seek services.

Methods

The Washington University in St. Louis IRB approved this study.

Sample: Unemployed African American women, 21 to 54 years.

Eligibility Criteria: Unemployed, but seeking work; living in St. Louis County, MO; children four to 15 years of age.

Exclusion Criteria: Pregnant; unemployed, but not seeking work; residency outside of St. Louis County.

Recruitment: Fifty women were recruited and screened at Community Action Agency of St. Louis (CAASTLC) or CAASTLC events from June to August 2016.

Measures: Demographic data; Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Distress, Mental Health and Stigma Module to assess levels of distress; Pediatric Symptom Checklist to assess child mental health.

Procedures: Participants eligible to participate completed the informed consent process, a pre-survey, watched a 2 minute educational video, completed a post survey & received a mental health & community resources packet. A 4-week telephone follow-up survey was completed. Participants received a \$15 gift card as an incentive for participation.

Analyses: Descriptive analyses and bivariate analysis using Wilcoxon Rank Sum test.

Table 1: Demographic Summary

Variable	Full Sample (n=50)		Follow Up (n=22)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Household Income				
No Income	19	38%	7	32%
Under \$10,000	24	48%	12	55%
\$10,000-19,999	3	6%	2	9%
\$20,000- 29,999	1	2%	1	5%
Missing	3	6%	-	-
Children between 3 and 16				
1	12	24%	2	9%
2	21	42%	10	45%
3	7	14%	3	14%
4 or more	10	21%	7	32%
Unemployed Length				
Less than 1 Month	3	6%	3	14%
1-3 months	14	28%	6	27%
3-6 months	8	16%	5	23%
6-12 months	6	12%	4	18%
1-3 years	9	18%	-	-
More than 3 years	9	18%	4	18%
Missing	1	2%	-	-
Education Level				
Less than HS	5	10%	3	14%
HS or Equivalent	15	30%	7	32%
Vocational/Tech School	7	14%	4	18%
Some College	15	30%	4	18%
Bachelor's Degree	7	14%	3	14%
Missing	1	2%	1	5%

Table 2. Warning Signs and Symptoms – Pre Survey

	Total Number of Symptoms/Points Possible	N	Mean Number of Symptoms/Score (SD)	Median Number of Symptoms/Score (IQR)
Experienced Symptoms of Stress	7	50	5.0 (1.7)	5.0 (2.0)
Experienced MH Warning Signs and Symptoms	13	50	5.5 (3.8)	5.0 (6.0)
Pediatric Symptom Checklist*	70	46	17.7 (14.5)	14.5 (23.0)
Children experienced MH warning signs and symptoms	17	49	3.4 (4.2)	2.0 (5.0)

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Analysis/Results

- Most (98%) of the women reported having experienced at least one of the 7 stress symptoms since being unemployed;
- Most (88%) of the women reported having experienced at least one of the 13 mental health warning sign/symptom from stress since being unemployed;
- Mothers reported concerns about changes in children's school performance (25%) and disobedience and aggression (25%).
- The majority of participants (59%) did not report using mental services for signs or symptoms of mental health concerns.
- Table 3 shows the comparisons across the different variables for the mental health symptoms and signs sum score.
- There was a significant difference in the number of mental health signs and symptoms experienced since being unemployed by women who had 2 or fewer children and women who had more than 2 children. Women with more than 2 children appear to have experienced a higher number of mental health symptoms and signs since being unemployed.

Table 3. Comparisons of Number of Mental Health Symptoms & Signs (out of 13 possible total)

Variable	Categories	N	Median (IQR)	Mean (SD)	Wilcoxon Rank Sum P
Education Level	High School or Less	20	6.0 (6.0)	5.5 (3.9)	0.9352
	More than High School	29	5.0 (6.0)	5.5 (3.8)	
Number of Children	2 or Fewer	33	4.0 (5.0)	4.7 (4.0)	0.0199
	More than 2	17	8.0 (2.0)	7.1 (2.9)	
Unemployment Length	0-6 months	25	5.0 (6.0)	5.2 (3.5)	0.6462
	6 months – 3 or more years	24	5.5 (6.5)	5.8 (4.2)	
Income	No Income	19	4.0 (8.0)	4.2 (3.6)	0.0901
	Some Income	28	6.0 (5.5)	6.3 (3.8)	

Discussion

- Self-reported mental health symptoms suggest the presence of stress among unemployed African American mothers, particularly those with more than two children.
- Of the 22 women who completed the MH service use section of the follow up survey, 13 reported not using a mental health service since the study began for any of the MH signs/symptoms; however, 11 of those 13 women reported having experienced at least one of the 13 MH warning signs/symptoms since being unemployed.
- Data suggest the need for stronger interventions to support African American women's mental health literacy and use of mental health services.