

How Resilience, Social Support, and Coping Impact Mental Health Among Rural Black Women Facing Discrimination

BACKGROUND

In the United States, many women do not get the mental health care they need. Depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common. This is especially true for African American women.

Many African American women face unfair treatment and pressure to appear strong and hide their feelings. These experiences can harm their mental health.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these issues became even greater. Many African American communities faced financial stress, job loss, and less access to health care. At the same time, some factors helped protect mental health. These included age, life experiences, and support from family, friends, and the community.

Two studies were done with African American women from rural South Carolina. Both studies looked at what harms mental health and what helps protect mental health.

WHAT WE DID:

Study 1 looked at how support from family and friends is linked to stress, PTSD, and feelings of hopelessness in African American women.

Study 2 looked at whether the ability to bounce back from hard times can protect mental health from unfair treatment.



In both studies, local community health workers trained by the South Carolina Community Health Worker Association (SCCHWA) invited 360 women from across South Carolina to take part between January and February 2024. The women were African American, were at least 18 years old, and lived in rural South Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Study 1, 328 women answered questions about the support they received, how they handled stress, and their mental health. They shared how often family, friends, and community members helped them. They also answered questions about how they

deal with stress and recover from hard times. The survey asked about stress, PTSD, and feelings of hopelessness during the past week. Researchers then studied how these factors were linked.

In Study 2, 300 women answered questions about unfair treatment, stress, and their ability to bounce back from challenges. They shared how often they faced unfair treatment in daily life and how well they handled stressful situations. The survey also asked about anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Researchers then studied how these experiences were linked to mental health.



WHAT WE FOUND

In Study 1, women who had more support from family, friends, and their community reported fewer PTSD symptoms. However, support did not greatly reduce feelings of hopelessness. Women who were better able to bounce back from hard times reported less hopelessness. Social support also helped build resilience, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even with strong resilience, many older African American women reported more PTSD symptoms. This may be because years of stress and unfair treatment can affect mental health over time. The way women handled stress also made a difference. Women who used healthy coping skills, such as solving problems or looking at challenges in a new way, reported less hopelessness. Women who avoided their problems or withdrew from others reported more PTSD symptoms and hopelessness.

Support from others did not always help women who were taking care of family members on their own develop resilience. In some cases, it could have meant that they had to depend too much on other people instead of getting the real help they needed.

In Study 2, women who faced more unfair treatment reported higher stress and were less able to bounce back from challenges. Women with higher resilience still experienced stress, but it had less impact on their mental health. Age also played a role. Older women who experienced unfair treatment reported less distress than younger women. This may mean that different generations respond to or think about unfair treatment in different ways.

CONCLUSION:

The study found that unfair treatment and very stressful experiences were linked to more mental health problems. African American women in South Carolina also had high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Women who avoided their problems or blamed themselves often reported worse mental health. Women with strong support from friends and family reported healthier ways to deal with stress.

Age and caregiving responsibilities could have both positive and negative effects. In some cases, they helped women cope with challenges. In other cases, they added more stress.

Support from family and friends and healthy coping skills can improve mental health. However, these

supports alone are not enough. People at greater risk need support to improve their mental health and to access mental health care and experience less unfair treatment.

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To learn more

Full reports are available online:

- <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40615-025-02645-w>
- <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40615-025-02559-7>

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