

SPIRITUALITY AND SELF-MANAGEMENT OF DIABETES IN AFRICAN AMERICANS

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Background: A major cause of morbidity and mortality in African Americans is type 2 diabetes. Although it is likely that many factors contribute to this morbidity and mortality, one important factor relates to the complexity of self-management of diabetes. An important factor affecting self-management of diabetes in African Americans is spirituality. Spirituality plays a central role in the lives of many African Americans, and often provides a framework for health and illness. There is still little information, though, about how spirituality affects the self-management of a disease such as diabetes. Spirituality may enhance self-management by providing support and guidance to African Americans. On the other hand, spirituality, influenced by low material resources and distrust of the health care system, may at times, reduce efforts toward self-management of diabetes for some African Americans who may choose to wholly or partially relinquish their self-management regime to God.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to describe how the spirituality of African Americans affects self-management of diabetes

Method: This study is using a grounded theory design. The sample consists of 30 African American men and women, ages 40-70, with type 2 diabetes. Participants are being recruited from a diabetes clinic and from churches in the Southeastern U.S., as well as through snowball sampling. Data are being collected using minimally structured interviews and a demographic data sheet. The method of analysis is constant comparison.

Findings: Preliminary findings suggest that the spirituality of the men and women is grounded in a dynamic and collaborative relationship with God. Because of this relationship, they feel (a) they have a part in self-management and must assume responsibility for their care; (b) the body is the Temple of God, and they must keep their bodies as healthy as possible so they can do the work of God; (c) physicians are intermediaries of God, therefore it is important to listen to and respect what physicians say about their diabetes self-management. Spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and reading Scripture are a way that the men and women keep connected with and participate in this relationship with God. These practices affect self-management by giving encouragement and motivation to follow a self-care regime; distracting from “unhealthy” behaviors such as eating foods high in sugar; and decreasing stress and anxiety, which stabilizes blood sugar levels.

Discussion: The spirituality of these African American men and women is an important factor that influences the self-management of their diabetes. It is therefore important for health care providers to assess if their patients have any spiritual needs that would help them to better manage their illness.

