

“I MADE IT THROUGH”: STORIES OF DIAGNOSIS AMONG RURAL AFRICAN AMERICANS WITH DIABETES

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PURPOSE To examine stories of diagnosis told by African Americans (AA) with diabetes who live in rural Virginia and participated in focus group sessions. To describe the experience of being diagnosed with diabetes as related by these participants.

METHOD This descriptive, exploratory study used qualitative methods in a team approach. Separate focus groups for men and women were conducted in three rural Virginia communities from Spring 2003 to Summer 2004 to capture the experience of AA participants with diabetes living in rural Virginia. The overall study goal was to obtain descriptions of participants' descriptions of factors that enhance and inhibit engaging in self-care associated with optimal diabetes management. Recruitment was conducted through local newspaper/radio advertisements, gender-specific flyers with postcards, and through area Black Churches and organizations. Interested participants were screened by study team members. Groups were conducted in accessible community locations by AA focus group leaders who were gender-matched to participants. Data were derived from responses to the question, "We'd like to start by hearing from each one of you individually the story of how you found out you had "sugar" or diabetes. [how & when were you diagnosed?]"

FINDINGS Sessions were audio taped and transcribed; preliminary findings are based on data from 73 participants (42 females; 31 males). All sessions were observed and recorded by at least 2 members of the study team, allowing comparison of field notes/observations about each session. Transcripts were first read in entirety and then subjected to textual line-by-line analysis with the goal of revealing and refining themes. Most participants could articulate events surrounding diagnosis with clarity. Being diagnosed was not an emotional and/or surprising experience for many of the others. This finding may reflect the fact that most had been diagnosed for many years and had begun to integrate this reality into their lives. A diabetes prevalence of 30% in these counties (more than twice the national prevalence among AAs) means that participants frequently encountered friends and family with diabetes, making diabetes seem almost 'normal'. Other participants were 'shocked' by the diagnosis with other data suggesting these individuals may have made significant lifestyle adjustments. A few participants had mistaken impressions surrounding their diagnosis (eg., one woman believed her diabetes stemmed from a blood transfusion).

DISCUSSION Stories of the experience of diagnosis led to rich descriptions about this experience and revealed valuable information about participants' perceptions of their diabetes. These findings inform health professionals about participants' experiences and about diabetes management. Findings may be useful to health care providers in assisting them to provide care to rural African Americans with diabetes.