

How Social Stresses Might Impact Cognitive Health in Underserved Communities

Megan Zuelsdorff, PhD

The Alzheimer's Association is dedicated to funding research to help create a world without Alzheimer's and other dementia. This includes many researchers right here in Wisconsin. The Alzheimer's Association Research Grant and Fellowship awarded Megan Zuelsdorff, PhD a grant to look at social stressors and cognitive aging. "My fellowship with the Alzheimer's Association has been extremely helpful in connecting me with mentors and supporting me in this critical research initiative," Zuelsdorff shared.



Zuelsdorff is presenting a poster at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference looking at the relationship between traumatic life events during childhood vs. adulthood and cognitive health, in Black and White older adults.

Impact of Traumatic Experiences

The research looked at traumatic events at different times in life, and the relationships with cognitive health. For Black older adults who experienced three or more traumatic events (e.g. death of a child, loss of a home, financial insecurities, etc.) during adulthood there was an exaggerated detriment in cognitive health. The research also concluded that stress was a factor in cognitive health for older adult Black populations. Effects of trauma for adults were different by race, possibly because chronically stressful conditions and lack of supportive services are more pronounced in underserved communities.

"We found that particularly for Black older adults, traumatic experiences during adulthood are an important contributor to cognitive health, but we know that their impact is modifiable" Zuelsdorff said. "If we can recognize that adversity for adults can impact brain health and cognitive function, then we can find places to intervene to make an impact."

Impact for Future Research and Diagnosis

"When you talk about communities that are underserved, it goes beyond research – they are underserved and facing more challenges in other areas of life," Zuelsdorff said. "We in the research field need to make research specifically not as burdensome, if we want to increase the number of people from underserved communities participating. Research participants give so much – travel, testing, time – and if you listen, you hear what's going on in their lives and you can adjust to make participating easier for them. We need to continue to improve – giving flexibility to come during off hours, seeing people in their homes and providing a respectful environment. It starts with looking beyond ourselves."

On the clinical side, a major take-away is that primary and acute care systems should discuss and understand both trauma and coping as part of caring for older adults. Stress and trauma can have ramifications for cognitive health. Making sure patients are connected to resources that can help them cope can be a key buffer.

Zuelsdorff is an Assistant Professor in the School of Nursing, University of Wisconsin-Madison.