

Multicultural Perspectives on Aging

According to recent research, people of ethnic minorities, particularly African-American and Hispanics are significantly more likely than caregivers of other races to consider Alzheimer's disease a normal part of the aging process and dismiss its symptoms as part of getting older. Compounding the problem, research indicated that African-Americans and Latino caregivers were significantly more likely to report that they did not know enough about the disease to recognize the symptoms compared to caregivers of other races.

Based on the responses provided by caregivers, on average those they cared for with Alzheimer's typically experienced symptoms for 31 months before receiving a diagnosis. However it's not only the lack of recognition for symptoms that causes a delay, concern about the stigma often associated with the disease can also play a role.

While assisted living facilities and nursing homes can play a positive role in the continuum of care for people with Alzheimer's disease, overall, African-American and Latino caregivers who stated that would not place their loved one in a facility believed that it is their responsibility to take care of their loved one or said they would feel guilty.

Religion and spirituality tend to play an important role in the lives of caregivers, from seeking support to making healthcare decisions. Ethnic-minorities who are religious are more likely to turn to religious leaders for support and let their religion influence their healthcare decisions. However, nearly two-thirds of non-religious caregivers said that their spiritual beliefs also have a significant impact on their healthcare decisions.

African-American and Latino caregivers rely heavily on support groups. In fact, African-American and Latino caregivers were significantly more likely to currently use a support group than caregivers of other races. A majority of caregivers - African Americans in particular - wished they had more emotional support from friends and family as well as knowledge and direction from healthcare professionals. At diagnosis, caregivers overall wished they had received more information about Alzheimer's disease and treatment options including the benefits of combining two classes of Alzheimer's drugs currently approved by the FDA.

Attitudes toward dementia and Alzheimer's disease among the Asian and Pacific Islanders varied from sympathy for their ill family members to frustration with the daily responsibility of providing care. However, Asian/Pacific Islander caregivers emphasized that the care of an aging spouse or parent was a duty they accepted without question.

When asked some ethnic-minority caregivers indicated a preference for the terms “forgetfulness” or “dementia” which were perceived to be more discreet, culturally sensitive terms of reference than “Alzheimer’s disease”. The primary challenge discussed by caregivers was the constant need to monitor the activities of their loved one. This emotional burden was often motivated by the need to keep the family member out of danger. Caregivers often described themselves as the “second casualty” because they not only became physically exhausted while caring for a family member on a daily basis, but they also had the added financial burden of providing 24-hour care. Ironically in many instances, the demands of caring for a loved one made it impossible for caregivers to maintain jobs outside of the home.

The understanding gained through the research conducted with African-American, Latino and Asian/Pacific caregivers offers helpful insight for counselors and healthcare professionals attempting to assist families struggling with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. Creating an atmosphere of cultural sensitivity may help families ease their own anxiety with the disease, receive medications sooner that may have positive effect and offer support before circumstances reach the level of crisis. Having a planned approach that addresses daily care requirements, medical treatment, and safety can help families manage as the disease progresses. Support for the family caregiver is vital to ensure the well-being of the person with the disease in the long journey of Alzheimer’s and with some guidance and understanding families can be assisted in a way that is respectful of a diverse culture.