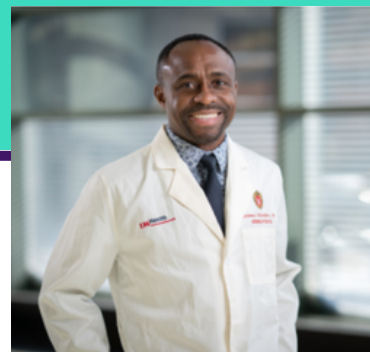


Resiliency and Alzheimer's Research

A SPECIAL FEATURE FOR BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Ozioma Okonkwo, PhD
UW-Madison

During Black History Month we would like to salute pioneers leading the way in Alzheimer's and dementia research. Dr. Ozioma Okonkwo is a neuroscientist at UW-Madison who leads research efforts looking at cognitive health and Alzheimer's disease. "The ultimate goal of my work is translational—the identification of people at greatest risk for Alzheimer's disease and the development of therapeutic strategies for decreasing their risk," Dr. Okonkwo shared.

The Notion of Resilience

"The notion of resilience is that not everyone who has a risk factor for Alzheimer's will necessarily develop symptoms of the disease, and there are ways to stave it off," Dr. Okonkwo said. "There are some established risk factors for developing Alzheimer's – age, family history, APOE4 gene – but not everyone who has these risk factors will develop Alzheimer's. My research focuses on understanding how an individual with risk factors can be resilient to the manifestation of disease symptoms."

Modifiable Lifestyle Factors

"As a part of my research we look at various lifestyle factors and determine if any of those factors can make you more resilient to developing dementia," Dr. Okonkwo said. "While there are many important modifiable lifestyle factors, one that has received considerable scientific support is exercise and physical activity. Physical activity is something that we do every day often without being aware because just about everything we do exerts energy. Research suggests that physical activity does preserve brain health and we want to encourage people to be more intentional about physical activity and find ways to build functional physical activity into things they are doing everyday anyway. Some simple examples are taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking your car further away in the parking lot when you go to the grocery store. Building in more physical activity does correlate to resilience to Alzheimer's."

Key Takeaways about Physical Activity

- **It's Never too late to start.** "Research suggest that even into your sixties and seventies, physical activity can have a clear impact on your brain health," Dr. Okonkwo said. "If individuals can start and maintain a regiment of physical activity, it can have an impact at any age."
- **Check with your primary healthcare provider.** "Before starting on any structured physical activity, it's always important to check with your healthcare provider to make sure you are safe to do so," Dr. Okonkwo said.
- **Start small and build.** "As with any significant lifestyle change, we encourage you to pace yourself," Dr. Okonkwo said. "You want to start small and then build the regimen in terms of frequency, duration or intensity."
- **Vary your activity.** "It's always good to have a variety of activities," Dr. Okonkwo said. "Develop a mixture of aerobic, strength and balance in your regimen. Variety not only helps keep you engaged but will also help you avoid injury because you aren't working the same muscles all the time."
- **Persevere.** "Any type of meaningful change in your lifestyle can be difficult," Dr. Okonkwo said. "We encourage folks to just persevere and it will get easier."

Dr. Ozioma Okonkwo is a faculty member at the UW-Madison in the Division of Geriatrics & Gerontology and the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center within the Department of Medicine. His research is supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging, the Alzheimer's Association, and other funding agencies. To learn more about his research, visit: <https://okonkwolab.medicine.wisc.edu>.