

NSHRF PROJECT FACT SHEET

Menopause and the “Strong Black Woman:” The Midlife Health and Well Being of African Canadian Woman

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This research project spanned three years and brought together community groups and academic researchers to explore the issue of menopause and the midlife health of African Canadian women in Nova Scotia.

Four major issues emerged: racism and midlife health; menopause experiences; the “Strong Black woman,” and depression.

Racism is an issue of concern for 96% of study participants, who affirmed that it exists in many forms and is a destructive force that intersects with many aspects of women’s experiences of menopause and midlife health on a daily basis. Women admitted that racism continues to feed their sense of stress as well as others’ expectations that they will be “strong.” Although the forms of racism may have changed over time, its overall destructive impact remains the same. Women are never able to let down their guard because of the need to constantly protect themselves and their families against racism. The accumulation of stress over the years resulting from pent-up anger, frustration, humiliation, and fear, from racism undermines women’s health.

All Black women experience menopause differently but agree it is significant and life-changing time in their lives. Women’s attitudes towards menopause vary greatly, as do their physical and emotional symptoms, which range from “annoying” to “devastating.” Menopause is a time of uncertainty, loss of control, and identity change. Although women often have prior knowledge of hot flashes, they are not prepared for the unpredictable mood swings and deep emotional changes. Women are surprised to discover that mind and body changes often happen all at once. Many are unprepared for feelings of constant fatigue.

The image of the Black woman as a superwoman who can survive everything and endure all has a powerful impact on women’s health. Some women see the image as a myth, others are convinced it as a reality. Most agree it embodies elements of both truth and fiction. This idealized notion of Black womanhood, combined with the legacy of Black women’s ancestors who survived slavery, is

both a positive force and a source of stress for women today. It offers a positive role model by affirming that Black women are capable of doing anything. It is destructive because it creates unrealistic expectations and functions as a barrier to women taking care of themselves.

Depression is not widely discussed or understood among Black women. Some believe it is not a topic of daily conversation because Black women are too busy coping with survival to deal with emotional issues. Others suggest the topic is avoided because of the taboo that persists about women going “crazy in the head” during midlife. Depression is difficult for women to talk about because it is difficult to identify. It often constitutes part and parcel of a “chain reaction” of life circumstances, and emotional and physical changes, taking place in women’s lives.

- 30 -

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