

Older African-Americans use religious songs to cope with stress, study shows

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(Medical Xpress) -- New research from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Nursing has shown that older African-Americans use religious songs in a personal way to cope with stressful life events. Songs long have been an important way for religious African-Americans to express their beliefs and faith, and the study provided evidence that religious songs are linked to the mental health of older African-Americans.

Jill Hamilton, Ph.D., R.N., an assistant professor at the School of Nursing, led the study, which appears online in *The [Gerontologist](#)*, a bimonthly journal that provides a multidisciplinary perspective on human aging through research and analysis in gerontology.

The research findings could help improve the cultural relevance of mental health programs and achieve better communication between older African-Americans and health-care providers. For example, a health-care provider could ask about a favorite song to help a patient feel more comfortable talking about [mental health problems](#).

Although other studies have examined the collective mental health benefits of religious songs to a group, such as in a church service, this is one of the first studies to examine how African-Americans use religious songs and the personal meanings associated with them.

The study grew out of Hamilton's desire to document religious songs that older African-Americans knew but that were no longer being taught to

younger generations. “As I gathered song titles and lyrics, people would tell me about the personal meaning of the songs,” she said. “I realized that they were using religious songs to support their [mental health](#) in their day-to-day lives.”

The study included 65 African-American older adults living in the southeastern United States. They said that during times of stress, religious songs helped them feel comforted, strengthened, uplifted, able to endure and able to find peace. Of the five types of religious songs studied, Hamilton found that those evoking thanksgiving and praise were most often used to cope with stress. “They were praising God even during difficult times,” she said. “These songs were reminders that God had brought them through hard times before and would do it again.”

Many study participants told Hamilton they learned songs at a young age and that their older relatives taught them that a song could get them through a stressful situation. “I don’t know that this form of intergenerational support is still taking place today,” she said. “It would be interesting to see if younger African-Americans use the same religious coping mechanisms as older African-Americans, especially since other studies have shown that younger African-Americans are more at risk for depression than older African-Americans.”

More information: gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/doi/10.1093/geronl/gns064.abstract

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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