

THE X FACTOR: Alzheimer's Disease Becomes Silent Epidemic Among Blacks

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As we end Mental Health Month, I thought it critical that I address the fourth leading cause of death among older African Americans: Alzheimer's disease.

To date, the Center for Disease Control reports that more than 5 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's disease, with a large percentage of those being African Americans. According to the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's is found more prevalent among African Americans, with estimates ranging from 14% to almost 100% higher. Therefore, the organization has identified the disease as a "silent epidemic," and an emerging health crisis among aging African Americans.

As an unfortunate consequence, many African-American families and caregivers are suffering in silence due to a lack of adequate mental health support, dietary resources and education on the risks factors of Alzheimer's disease, and its impact on the health and well-being of the African-American family and community.

So I sat with Petra Niles, senior manager for African-American services, education and dementia care networks, at **Alzheimer's Los Angeles**, about the impact of the disease on the black community; and what Gen Xers need to know, since many of us are now taking care of our baby boomer parents who are entering the age of risk.

SQ: Talk about Alzheimer's being "a silent epidemic" in the black community. Why don't we talk about it?

PN: For many years now research has identified African Americans as twice as likely as Caucasians to develop Alzheimer's disease. Yet it is not readily discussed due to the stigma attached to the disease. Having a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease can bring about isolation, feelings of hopelessness and despair as the diagnosis of the disease is often viewed negatively.

African Americans should be aware of the signs and speak with their physician regarding concerns [because] it's improper to self-diagnose or diagnose else.



Signs for concern include:

- Feeling less able to do day-to-day activities.
- [Challenges] managing finances and paying bills.
- Misplacing or losing things more often.
- [An increase in] anger, anxiety or sadness.
- Trouble with reading, writing and conversations.
- Repeating questions or stories.
- Withdrawing from family, friends or social activities.
- Hearing that others share concerns about changes in [their] memory or behavior.
- Getting lost on familiar roads or paths.
- [And] needing more reminders to stay organized.

These are changes that may not be discussed with family or friends. Often [in our community] there is a dismissal of [these] signs or excuses given as to why certain behaviors [have] occurred.

SQ: What has been your main challenge in trying to educate the black community on the disease?

PN: A main challenge is outreach and education. Everyone needs to [be educated]. [So] it's important that individuals [locate and] attend community presentations and events provided by [organizations like] **Alzheimer's Los Angeles** in their cities and counties.

SQ: Talk about the impact of caregiving on black women.

PN: The impact of caregiving on African-American women is enormous. Women [often] bear the burden of taking care of spouses, aging parents, [and] sometimes friends and other relatives.

[In addition], women are [also] twice as likely as men to have Alzheimer's disease; and it's the third leading cause of death for older women in Los Angeles County.

SQ: Talk about the need for more caregiver support in the black community. Why is caring for the caregiver so vital?

PN: Being a caregiver for someone who has a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease can last more than 15 years. Therefore, caregiving can impact the [caregiver's] health, employment, finances, social activities and overall lifestyle.

The journey of the caregiver is challenging and support is [often] needed. Many people living with Alzheimer's disease are cared for at home; [and] support may come from relatives, neighbors, church membership or local social service organizations. Various roles of the caregiver may include driver, meal planner, meal preparation, dispenser of medications, activity director, decision maker [or more].

These duties can begin early in the morning and end late at night each day. It takes a village. [So] it's important for the caregiver to build a network of support systems that provides services, options and strength for their ongoing role.

Caregivers [also] need to have a break or respite; [and] times for self care are necessary for their own well-being.

SQ: What do we need to know about the impact of our diets and brain wellness?

PN: Our brains give us the ability to read, speak, write, think, remember skills, reason, make decisions and learn new things. [And] all of these functions are affected by Alzheimer's disease.

[Among African Americans], the chances for developing the disease [are increased due to our] high prevalence of diabetes, high blood pressure, high blood sugar and heart disease. [So someone] with one or more of those conditions is at greater risk. [Therefore,] it's important to know your blood pressure numbers, cholesterol numbers and blood sugar numbers.

Also, to maintain a healthy brain and live a purposeful life, we have to consider a heart healthy diet; [because] the heart and brain are linked. [Therefore, we should consider] a heart healthy diet of colorful foods such as berries, vegetables and omega 3 fatty acids; which can help to maintain both a healthy heart and a healthy brain.

[We should also] participate in physical activities ... and in social activities; [and] be aware that what you choose to eat can affect your health [and brain].

SQ: Alzheimer's has a near 15-year onset before symptoms start showing. So what's your message for today's Gen Xers?

PN: As it relates to Alzheimer's disease, Gen Xers play an important role. First, educating themselves about the disease is necessary. Secondly, using social media to further bring awareness about the disease; as well as its challenges [with caregiving]. Third, [Gen Xers] have the ability to influence key stakeholders around some of the caregiving issues and concerns; potentially bringing about legislation.

[And] finally, Gen Xers bring energy and innovation to a disease that slowly and gradually takes the lives of their parents and grandparents.