Effects of Stressful Life Events in Young Black Men with High Blood Pressure

Objectives: 1) To describe stressful life events as experienced by a sample of young Black men with high blood pressure (HBP) living in inner-city Baltimore, Maryland; and 2) to examine the effect of cumulative stressful life events on substance use, depression, and quality of life.

Methods: Data were obtained over 48 months by interview from 210 men in an HBP management study.

Results: Stressors repeatedly occurring over time included death of family member or close friend (65.2%), having a new family member (32.9%), change in residence (31.4%), difficulty finding a job (24.3%), and fired or laid off from work (17.6%). Involvement with crime or legal matters was reported at least twice during the 48 months by 33.3% of men. When a cumulative stressful life events score was calculated by summing the number of events experienced at 6-month points over 48 months and tested for its relationship with the health outcomes, the findings of multivariate analyses revealed significant associations between cumulative life stressors and depression and quality of life. No significant relationship was found between stressful life events and substance use.

Conclusions: The results suggest that cumulative stressful life events have a negative effect on mental health and quality of life in young Black men with HBP. Future study should focus on developing interventions to assist individuals in managing distress related to stressful events with necessary community resources. (Ethn Dis. 2006;16:64-70)

Key Words: Black Men, High Blood Pressure, Stressful Life Events

INTRODUCTION

Stressful life events, a measure of quantifying stress, include a range of both positive and negative life events of sufficient magnitude to change one’s usual activities. According to Dohrenwend et al, three clusters of major negative events exist: fateful loss events (eg, death of family or loss of home because of disaster), severe physical illness or injury, and major loss of social support (eg, separation, divorce). Although some counter examples exist, psychological stress from stressful life events is a predisposing risk factor for substance use and a variety of mental and physical illnesses such as depression, cancer, coronary heart disease, and AIDS. Moreover, stressful life events have demonstrated a harmful effect on the outcome of disease in patients with AIDS, cancer, multiple sclerosis, bipolar disorder, and cardiac events.

Inner-city young Black men with high blood pressure (HBP) face special challenges not only because of their HBP, which requires ongoing self-management and care, but also because of a high likelihood of living in a stressful residential environment where poverty and crime are common. The harsh environment, often combined with a lack of support system and healthcare resources, contributes to increased risk for HBP complications such as stroke and end-stage renal disease in urban Blacks.

Previously, Hill and colleagues reported that in a sample of 309 inner-city Black men with HBP, only 27% were employed either full-time or part-time, nearly three-quarters (71%) had an annual income <$10,000, and approximately two-thirds (64%) reported a history of incarceration. The purposes of this study were two-fold: 1) to describe stressful life events at eight time points over 48 months, as experienced by the same sample; and 2) to examine the effect of cumulative stressful life events on alcohol and illicit drug use, depression, and quality of life (QOL) at 48-month follow-up. We predicted that more cumulative stressful life events would predict more negative health outcomes as manifested by more alcohol and illicit drug use, more depression, and lower QOL in this sample of young, inner-city, Black men with HBP living in Baltimore, Maryland.

METHODS

Subjects and Setting

Longitudinal data from a randomized clinical trial to improve HBP care...