Title: Can Religion be Incorporated into Health Promotion Programs Related to Obesity?

Author: Shalonda Horton, MSN, RN

Background: If the current trends in the prevalence of obesity continue, then for the first time in history younger populations, such as children, adolescents, and emerging adults, in the U.S. are on course to have shorter life expectancies compared to their parents. However, we may be able to capitalize upon the health benefits associated with religion to decrease the rates of obesity among emerging adults.

Methods: A pilot qualitative descriptive study was conducted to determine how emerging adults used religion to manage their health. Two separate focus groups were conducted with White and African American participants. A convenience sample of participants, ages 18 to 24 years, living in a central Texas community were recruited for the study. They each received a $20 gift card for their time in participating in the focus groups. The interviews from both focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed. Content analysis was used for data evaluation.

Results: Of the seven categories identified from the data, the following categories serve as building blocks for program and policy development for obesity prevention among emerging adult populations: (1) religion influences behavior, (2) barriers to healthy behaviors, (3) religion and obesity prevention, and (4) health promotion program characteristics. There were mixed feelings among the participants on whether or not religion should be used in health promotion programs to prevent obesity, particularly among African-American participants. However, both focus groups provided creative recommendations on how religion could be incorporated into health promotion programs.

Implications: The results from this study suggest that interventions should focus on the benefits of practicing healthy behaviors and the barriers that prevent such behaviors. Policy developers have a key role in shifting society’s focus and media messages from the aesthetics of health (i.e., appearance) to the positive results and benefits of practicing healthy behaviors (i.e., having more energy). For after all, as a majority of the participants shared “everyone should be healthy and not just skinny or obese people.”

Key words: emerging adults, religion, obesity, health promotion programs