

# ***Racism Stress and African American Reproductive Disadvantage***



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# OBJECTIVES

- 1) **Conceptualize racism within a stress and health paradigm**
- 2) **Review racism and pregnancy research findings**
- 3) **Describe African American women's lived experiences with racism**
- 4) **Discuss ways to move forward**

# ***Infant Mortality***

***deaths before age 1 per 1000 live births***

<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>6.7</b>
<b>NONHISPANIC WHITE</b>	<b>5.8</b>
<b>HISPANIC</b>	<b>5.6</b>
<b>ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER</b>	<b>4.9</b>
<b>NONHISPANIC BLACK</b>	<b>13.6</b>

# ***Preterm Birth***

***< 37 weeks gestation***

<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>12.8%</b>
<b>NONHISPANIC WHITE</b>	<b>12.2%</b>
<b>HISPANIC</b>	<b>12.0%</b>
<b>ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER</b>	<b>10.9%</b>
<b><i>NONHISPANIC BLACK</i></b>	<b><i>18.4%</i></b>

# ***Low Birthweight***

***< 2500 grams***

<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>8.3%</b>
<b>NONHISPANIC WHITE</b>	<b>7.3%</b>
<b>HISPANIC</b>	<b>7.0%</b>
<b>ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER</b>	<b>8.1%</b>
<b>NONHISPANIC BLACK</b>	<b>14.0%</b>

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Disparity not fully explained by established



***SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC***

***MEDICAL***

***BEHAVIORAL***

**risk factors**

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# GENETICS: Extremely Unlikely



- *Nativity differentials*
- *European genetic admixture*
- *Disparities across all the leading causes*
- *Disparities across life course*

# *Psychosocial Stress*

**Environmental demands that tax or exceed one's ability to adapt, resulting in emotional and biological responses that could increase disease risk**

*Cohen, Kessler, & Gordon, 1995*





**STRESS**



**BW**

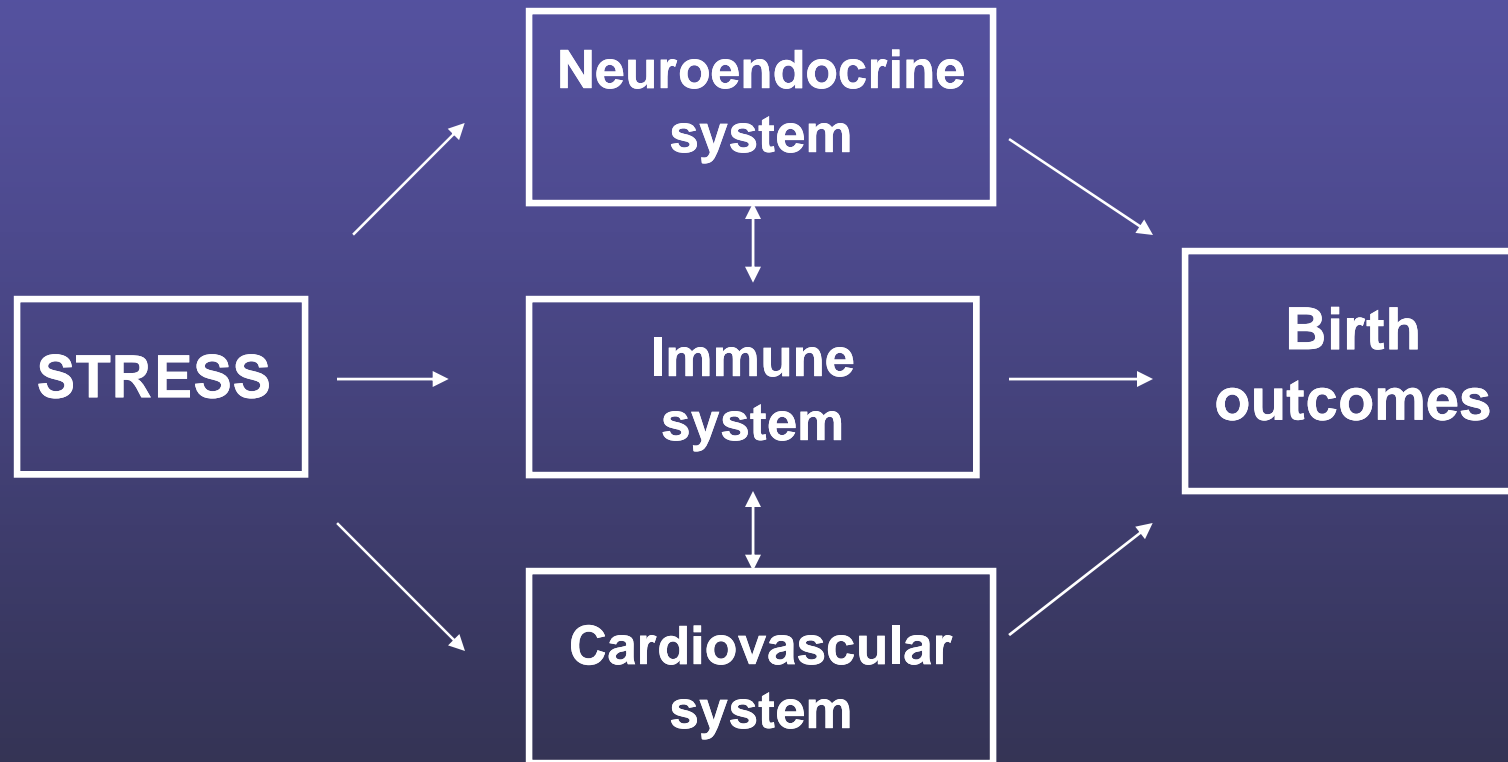
**GA**



*African American pregnant women report more stress exposure, greater emotional distress, and may be more vulnerable to its adverse health effects than other groups*

*Feldman et al, 1997; Orr et al, 1996; Zambrana et al, 1999*

# A Bio-Psycho-Social Model



# Neuroendocrine System

# THE HPA AXIS

- ✓ **Stress hormones in placenta (CRH) control placental clock**
- ✓ **Maternal stress → additional stress hormones are released**
- ✓ **Higher CRH = higher risk for PTL, PTD, FGR**

# Immune System

# INFECTION

- ✓ **Paternal antigens → immunosuppression**
- ✓ **Stress → immunosuppression**
- ✓ **Infection (e.g., BV) major risk factor for PTD**
  - ✓ **Inflammation promotes placental CRH expression**
  - ✓ **AfrAms highest rates**

# Cardiovascular System



# HYPERTENSIVE DISORDERS

- ✓ **Stress** → cardiovascular disorders
  - ✓ AfrAms highest incidence
- ✓ **Preg-induced hypertension & preeclampsia**
  - ✓ **Elevated CRH levels**
    - ✓ Major PTD risk
    - ✓ Abnormal uteroplacental blood flow

# Stress in Black Women's Lives

*Many cannot even identify the  
stress that gnaws at them....*

*Opal Palmer Adisa, 1990*

# DEFINING RACISM

**A system of pervasive race-based oppression rooted in ideological notions of the innate inferiority of non-Whites, whereby people are socially stratified along a color continuum with Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom. Racism is manifested as prejudiced attitudes, unfair treatment, institutionalized barriers, and eurocentrism.**

*Harrell, 2000; Williams, 1999*

# RACISM

*a likely fundamental cause  
of the nation's enduring  
racial/ethnic disparities in health*

*James, 2003*

***“A GIRL LIKE ME”***

***\*Available on YouTube\****

# **“It’s the Skin You’re In”**

## **AfrAm women’s experiences of racism**

**Nuru-Jeter et al, 2008**

- \* Racism occurs thru life; in childhood, powerful/enduring**

*I used to play with this White girl everyday, like she was my best friend...she would always come to my auntie’s house. And then there was one time when I went to her house and she said, “Well, my parents said we can’t have anybody (Black) in the house.” And that was something that stayed with me my whole life.... And that’s when I first learned that... there is a difference...with the colors. I thought about it a lot. I still think about it.*

**\* Direct and vicarious exps, esp. regarding children**

*I'm stressed because now that my kids are getting older, the school age ones, they go through it all the time... So everyday I have to deal with that, so it's stressful. I take that in internally... Because as adults, it seems like I could overlook it a little bit...but you have kids coming home everyday – oh, he called me a nigger or black. That affects you as a parent. I go through the hurt when they go through the hurt.*

## \* Interpersonal, institutional, internalized forms

*I know when I'm looking for schools, I'm like, 'Am I just thinking this school is good because it's White and White folks send their kids here? And am I thinking this school is just OK because a lot of Black folks are there?' And that's sad when you are a Black person and you have to fight against your own stuff*



## \* Experienced across life domains

- *treated like a “Black dictionary”*
- *“I was walking down the street and this White woman grabbed her purse... That’s something you always feel. Because no matter what you have, you are Black first. They will kiss your behind as long as you have money, but they still see a nigger.”*

## **\*Active and passive responses**

*The thing is, there is never any correct or pleasant way to address it. All of the things I was thinking about saying to this lady, none of them would have come out right. You know, the angry Black woman thing... There's an effort ... I really want to address things when they happen. I don't want to walk away mad or let things linger...*

*I don't think I really think about it. I just know it's just the skin you're in. It's another part of your life.*

## **\* Pervasive vigilance**

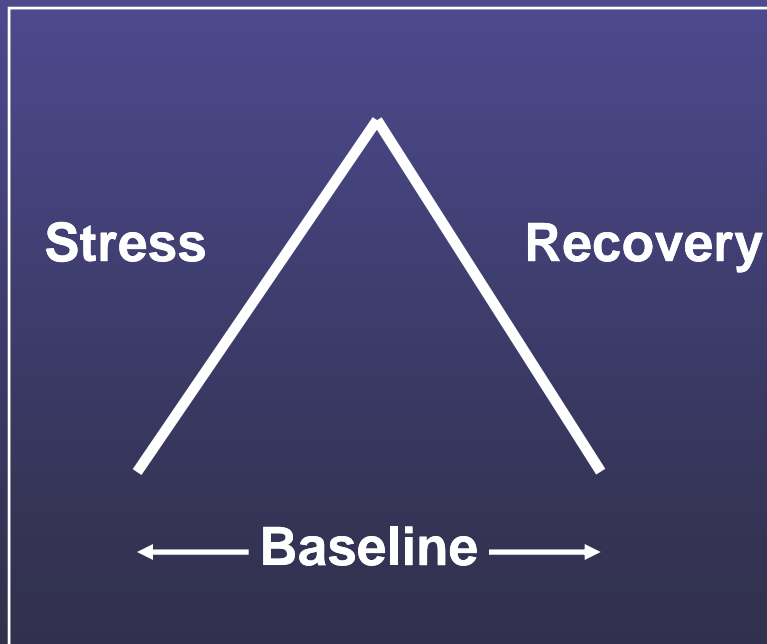
*When I'm going shopping, I prepare myself. It's like I will take forever to find me something to wear because I feel I'm not going to be treated right... I think when I go out every day some situation is going to happen as far as racism.*

*You just get tense because you know you have to brace yourself for something stupid that they're gonna say... With a White person, you know some level of racism is going to hop out of their mouth... And so you have to prepare your body for that.*

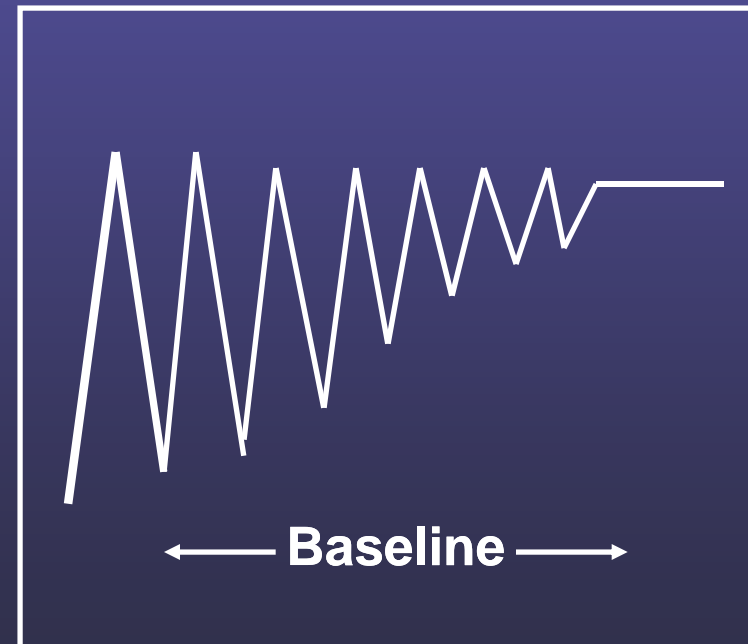
# ALLOSTATIC LOAD

Physiologic toll of repeated and/or chronic stress system activation

## *Allostasis*



## *Allostatic Load*



# Loaded Down

- ***Weathering or Stress age***
  - Accelerated decline in reproductive health with aging (Geronimus, 1996; Hogue & Bremner, 2005)
- **HPA dysregulation in AfrAm girls & pregnant and non-pregnant women** (Glynn, 2007; Holzman et al, 2001; Yanovski et al, 1996)
- **Heightened & prolonged cardiovascular reactivity to racism** (Brondolo, 1999)
  - hypertension = cardiovascular dysregulation due to stress hyperreactivity
  - AfrAms have highest rates generally and in pregnancy

# MEASURING RACISM

*Have you ever felt that you  
were treated unfairly  
because of your race?*

# Racism & Pregnancy Research

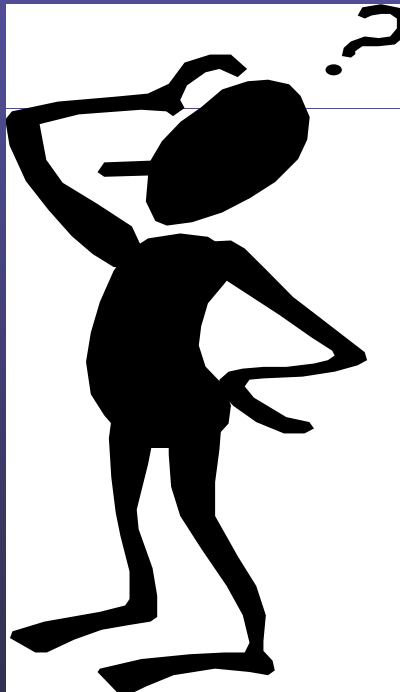
- **Linked to AfrAm birth outcomes; PTD ORs 1.40 - 3.05, VLBW ORs 2.60 - 3.30** (see review by Giscoombe & Lobel, 2005)
- **Predicts AfrAm BW & PTD over and above medical/SES risk and general stress; childhood exposure key** (Dole et al, 2004; Parker Dominguez et al, 2008)
- **AfrAms report more exposure than Black immigrants** (Parker Dominguez et al, 2009); **more likely to keep to self/accept as fact of life** (Parker Dominguez et al, in progress)
- **Preliminary evidence of BP and NE pathways** (Parker Dominguez et al, in progress)

# Racism & Pregnancy Research

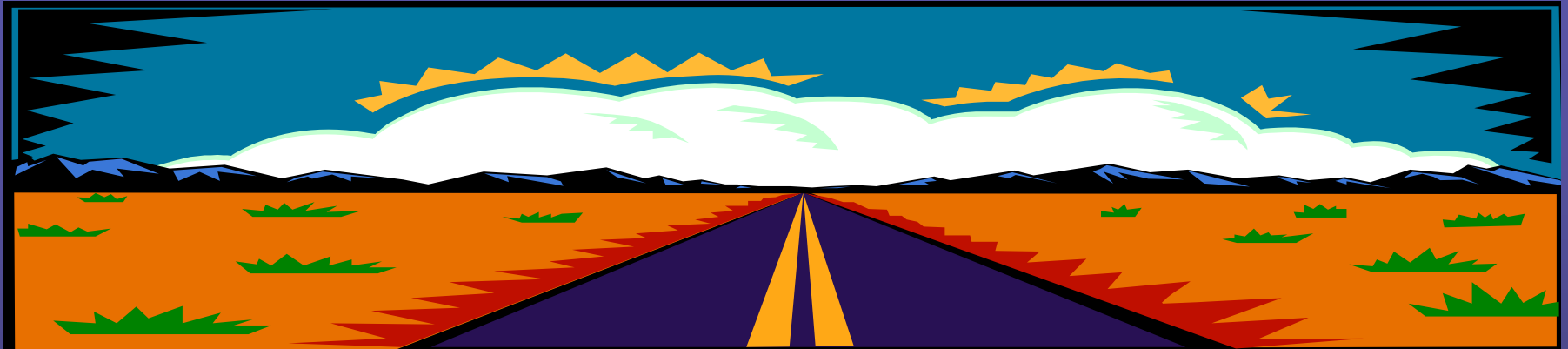
- **AfrAms less likely to receive med advice, info on health risks/complics** (Kogan et al, 1994), **common prenatal txs** (Paul et al, 2006)
- **Less intensive and poorer quality health care services** (IOM, 2002)
- **Providers assume preg AfrAms are young, unmarried, multiparous, on welfare, unhealthy; indifferent/disrespectful care** (Murrell et al, 1996)
- **AfrAms do not believe providers have their best interest at heart** (Halbert et al, 2006)



# WHAT TO DO???



**Looking ahead toward solutions .....**



**RESEARCH**

**EDUCATION**

**ADVOCACY**

**ACTIVISM**

**Infant Mortality & Racism Action Learning Collaborative!**