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# Empowering African American Mothers Utilizing a Community-Based Mindfulness Painting Intervention to Create Safety and Belongingness (Autonomisation de mères afro-américaines par l'utilisation d'une intervention communautaire de peinture de pleine conscience pour créer sécurité et appartenance)

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## ABSTRACT

Painting in art therapy is a mindfulness activity that fosters relaxation, increases self-awareness, and can create a positive shared experience between participant and therapist. The Relational-Cultural Theory framework guided this mixed methods study. Using the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) and a brief demographic questionnaire, the study examined the mental health levels of 24 African American mothers ( $N=24$ ) who attended a Moms Empowerment Workshop in a community-based setting two years after the COVID-19 global pandemic was declared over. This study explored how eight mothers ( $N=8$ ) who participated in structured interviews after the workshop, described their experiences of the workshop and mindfulness painting activity. It was hypothesized that doing a mindfulness painting activity facilitated by an African American Mental Health Art Therapist in a community-based setting would be received positively by the participants. The results indicated that the majority of the mothers exhibited positive mental health and having an African American Mental Health Art Therapist facilitate the intervention in a community-based setting fostered belonging, psychological safety, and strengthened their connections with one another.

## RÉSUMÉ

La peinture en art-thérapie est une activité de pleine conscience qui favorise la relaxation, augmente la conscience de soi et peut créer une expérience positive partagée entre participant et thérapeute. Le cadre de la théorie relationnelle et culturelle a guidé cette étude à méthodes mixtes. À l'aide du formulaire court du continuum de santé mentale (*MHC-SF*) et d'un bref questionnaire démographique, l'étude a examiné les niveaux de santé mentale de 24 mères afro-américaines ( $N=24$ ) qui ont participé à un atelier d'autonomisation dans un cadre communautaire deux ans après la fin déclarée de la pandémie mondiale de COVID-19. Cette étude a exploré comment huit mères ( $N=8$ ) ayant participé à des entretiens structurés après l'atelier ont décrit leurs expériences de l'atelier et de l'activité de peinture de pleine conscience. L'hypothèse était que la réalisation d'une activité de peinture de pleine conscience animée par une art-thérapeute afro-américaine en santé mentale dans un cadre communautaire serait accueillie positivement par les participantes. Les résultats ont indiqué que la majorité des mères présentaient une santé mentale positive et que le fait d'avoir une art-thérapeute afro-américaine en santé mentale facilitait l'intervention dans un cadre communautaire, favorisait l'appartenance, la sécurité psychologique et renforçait leurs liens les uns avec les autres.

## Understanding the problem

During 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic—an international outbreak of the coronavirus infectious disease that caused severe acute respiratory issues

(World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.)—spread rapidly across the globe, resulting in widespread fear, uncertainty, and social isolation. During this period, individuals' mental health

was significantly affected, with social determinants such as gender, occupation, and race/ethnicity exacerbating the negative mental and physical health outcomes associated with COVID-19 (Toll & Norton, 2020). The mental health of African American mothers, who are part of a resilient marginalized community, was severely impacted by increased rates of depression and anxiety (Baggett et al., 2021; Chandler et al., 2021; Obinna, 2021; Otu et al., 2020). The intersection of being an African American woman and mother has disproportionately impacted their experiences of health disparities, barriers, and lack of trust and safety, leading to an increase in adverse health outcomes compared to white women (Brockey, 2023; Giurgescu et al., 2015; Mekawi et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2003; Williams & Cooper, 2019).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2023), a national health science-based service organization in the United States, the maternal mortality rate for African American women in 2021 was 69.9 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared to 26.6 deaths per 100,000 live births for white women. The death rate for African American mothers was 2.6 times higher than that of white women. Additionally, the rates for African American women were significantly higher compared to those for white and Hispanic women, indicating a pronounced racial disparity in maternal health outcomes. This further highlights the mental health challenges experienced by African American mothers, which are exacerbated by racial health disparities and influenced by the trust, comfort, and strength they draw from the intimate relationships formed in their own community.

Community support has served as a protective factor for the African American community, providing a safe environment for engagement (Cyril et al., 2015; Sanders, 1998). However, the limited social interaction resulting from lockdown restrictions during the pandemic diminished the effectiveness of this support. There was a shortage of safe in-person gathering spaces for mothers, which limited opportunities for this population to socially connect with others (Brannon & Wiant Cummins, 2023; Ollivier et al., 2021). California, a state in the United States, implemented some of

the strictest COVID-19 policies, including mandatory lockdown restrictions that required residents to stay home except for essential activities, and closed all public spaces. These measures were in effect for over a year (Bolori & Saghafian, 2023; Campedelli et al., 2021; Hallas et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2023). This further disconnected African American mothers from opportunities to interact within their communities, underscoring the necessity of addressing their mental health needs in a community-based environment where they feel comfortable and safe.

Community-based interventions acknowledge cultural norms, such as socialization within church communities, affectionate engagement, communal way of life, and kinship bonds. Moreover, interventions based in African American communities address social concerns, such as general safety, police brutality, and racial discrimination for African American mothers (Parker, 2021). Being surrounded by other African Americans in a community-based environment, while engaging in therapeutic interventions, fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance to be their authentic selves (Beckett et al., 2022). They are free to speak in their own language and tone, without the need to explain colloquialism or clarify the meanings of certain phrases.

Unfortunately, when the COVID-19 in-person meeting restrictions were lifted, residents struggled with how to interact with one another. Additionally, two years after the pandemic was declared over by the United States government, African American mothers (Hassoun Ayoub et al., 2022) continued to struggle with mental health challenges, social anxieties, making connections with others, and finding safe spaces to engage and interact with one another (Hassoun Ayoub et al., 2022; Kinser et al., 2022; Ollivier et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2022). There emerged a need to create safe havens within communities where African American mothers could connect and learn new strategies to assist in their mental health.

This study examined the mental health levels of African American mothers who attended a moms' empowerment workshop held in a community-based setting in 2022 and facilitated

by an African American Mental Health Art Therapist. It was not known if engaging in a mindfulness painting activity facilitated by an African American Mental Health Art Therapist in a community-based environment would be received positively or not by the participants. There are various positive benefits of painting and using art-based therapy interventions. Art-based practices within a community-based setting serve as interventions that enhance mental health (Jensen & Bonde, 2018) due to their person-centered and recovery-oriented approach (Van Lith et al., 2013).

### **Mindfulness and creating artwork**

There is a positive correlation between art making and mental health (Jensen & Bonde, 2018; Van Lith et al., 2013). Mental health refers to a state of mental well-being that enables individuals to cope with life's stressors effectively without disrupting their daily life functioning (WHO, 2022). Painting can be considered a mindfulness-based activity that fosters a sense of calmness, reduces tension and stress levels, and allows people to be in the present moment (Liu et al., 2024; Saavedra-Macías et al., 2023). Mindfulness has been described as paying attention on purpose, being in the present moment and having an awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions without judgment (Creswell, 2017; Cullen, 2011; Fulton, 2016; Kemper et al., 2015; Neff & Germer, 2013). Mindfulness is a form of meditation that originated from Buddhist teachings and was developed to stimulate enhanced insight and awareness (Raab et al., 2015).

Mindfulness is considered a therapeutic intervention that fosters self-care, self-compassion, and reduces stress symptoms while increasing one's resiliency skills (Baldini et al., 2014; Raab et al., 2015). Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MBAT) combines art therapy activities with mindfulness practices (Peterson, 2014). Research has demonstrated symptomatic relief for clients experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fatigue, and has shown improvements in quality of life (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020). While painting, the artist stays focused on the present moment,

attuned to the sensation of the materials, being mindful of each stroke of the paintbrush. Painting has been found to benefit psychological well-being and is proven to positively reduce stress and anxiety levels (Liu et al., 2024; Saavedra-Macías et al., 2023).

Art therapy as a community intervention is focused on both individual and community healing (Tillet & Tillet, 2018). Research conducted by Nolan (2019) underscored the importance of community art therapy in exploring self-care and building healthy relationships that foster safety and acceptance. Additional research has demonstrated that art therapy sessions can improve well-being, increase relaxation, stimulate creativity, and enhance social engagement (Lipe et al., 2012). Participants of art therapy have expressed being more equipped to manage their individual self-care practices (Lipe et al., 2012). Through the use of art making, individuals connect through shared experiences, fostering a sense of belonging that facilitates positive transformation for both the individual and the community (Tillet & Tillet, 2018).

### **Strength of connectedness**

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) was used as the framework that guided this study. RCT focuses on the strength of connections and proposes that our individual growth is dependent on our connections to others (Jordan, 2008). RCT emphasizes the strength of connections and how we thrive through creative, empathetic, and lasting relationships (Jordan, 2017; Warren & Donaldson, 2017). Because African American mothers were cut off from social interactions during the pandemic for over a year, it became crucial to provide a safe, community-based environment where they could connect with other women who shared their cultural identity. To engage in a mindfulness painting activity and explore how they described their experiences during the Moms Empowerment Workshop. The participants in this study reported having a sense of safety and belonging being surrounded by other African American mothers who "got it" and understood them because they experienced the same societal challenges.

This study addressed the current problem of African American mothers having limited access to community-based mental health mindfulness-based interventions in a safe environment that addressed their specific needs. This study explored whether a community-based mindfulness painting intervention, facilitated by an African American Mental Health Art Therapist, would increase participants' sense of connectedness and be positively received by them. Furthermore, this study offers a better understanding of the protective factors (i.e., conditions that promote well-being) that contributed to feelings of belonging, one of the themes identified among African American mothers.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the mental health levels of the 24 African American Mothers who attended the Moms Empowerment Workshop in 2022, two years after the global COVID-19 pandemic. A phenomenological approach was adopted to explore how participants described their experiences with the community-based mindfulness painting activity through the lens of Relational-Cultural Theory. A mixed methods approach was used to collect the data. The quantitative data was collected from a questionnaire survey, the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) that provided information on the mothers' mental health levels, if they were flourishing or non-flourishing, and provided the descriptive analysis. The phenomenology qualitative data were gathered through structured open-ended interviews that described the mothers' experiences of the painting activity and event. To ensure confidentiality, the mothers of this study were assigned pseudonyms. For example, "Tanisha" and "Monique" are used within this article to refer to two of the study's participants.

The transcripts from the structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data from the audio transcripts were reviewed, coded, and organized into themes (Grinnell & Unrau, 2018). Open coding was employed during thematic analysis to identify distinct concepts, analyze, and report patterns and themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the researcher analyzed the quantitative data using a

standardized questionnaire that had been employed in previous research studies on mental health. The researchers employed a qualitative approach to explore how African American mothers who attended the Moms Empowerment Workshop in a community-based setting and participated in a mindfulness painting activity facilitated by an African American Mental Health Art Therapist described their experiences. The survey questionnaire was used to provide statistical information on the mothers' reported mental health levels. Quantitative research provides statistical data on the variables to explain a phenomenon (Gay et al., 2014).

## Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF)

The Moms Empowerment Workshop was held after the COVID-19 pandemic and the lifting of lockdown restrictions in California. The researchers aimed to assess the mothers' levels of mental health prior to their participation in the Moms Empowerment Workshop. The quantitative data collected for this study utilized the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) questionnaire and a brief demographic questionnaire created by the researcher. The MHC-SF is a validated instrument used regularly to measure levels of mental health and has shown an excellent internal consistency and reliability (>.80) in previous studies (Keyes, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Lamers et al., 2011; Robitscheck & Keyes, 2009; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). This questionnaire was chosen because it was short and provided information on the mothers' levels of mental health. The MHC-SF is a 14-item self-report questionnaire that measures mental health using a five-point interval rating scale that ranges from 0 (never) to 5 (everyday). The instrument has 14 items that are broken up into three subscales (emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being) to measure overall well-being and assess if the participants had flourishing or languishing mental health levels (Keyes, 2009).

## Participants, recruitment, and data collection

The authors used purposive sampling to recruit 24 moms to attend the Moms Empowerment

Workshop. The inclusion criteria for this study were that the participants needed to be mothers and be able to attend the in-person workshop. The recruited participants identified being African American and resided in Southern California. Of those sample participants, eight mothers participated in a follow-up interview to provide their perspectives on the community-based mindfulness painting intervention. To obtain a descriptive summary of the characteristics of the mothers, demographic data were collected for the following variables: age, working status, age of children, and ethnicity. One of the demographic questions asked the participants if they used weekly self-care strategies because it could have an impact on their reported mental health levels.

Data were collected after approval had been granted by the California State University of San Bernardino Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were recruited through posted flyers about the workshop on different social media platforms. Prior to the workshop, the mothers consented to participate in the study, completed the MHC-SF questionnaire at the beginning of the workshop online through Qualtrics, and the interviews were later conducted virtually using the Zoom platform. Eight of the participants who attended the workshop consented to be contacted after the event to be interviewed about their experiences.

The sample included all adult mothers who had registered to attend The You Matter Too, Moms Empowerment Workshop in May of 2022 that was hosted at a local community restaurant on a Saturday from 10 am to 2pm. The event was facilitated by this researcher who identifies as an African American mother and is a Licensed Mental Health Art Therapist. The researcher collaborated with a local art instructor, an African American woman, who owned a small mobile art business to provide the art materials (e.g., a canvas with a traced image of a woman, paint brush, paint, and instructions on how to paint) for the mothers to paint along with a paint color guide. The art instructor was only involved in providing painting materials and instructions to the mothers and was not involved in other parts of this study.

## The art intervention

The facilitator invited the participants at the Moms Empowerment Workshop to engage in a painting activity that lasted 2 hours. The mothers were provided a canvas of a pre-drawn image of a woman. The purpose of using a pre-drawn image was to allow the mothers to feel more relaxed with the activity and to take away any perceived pressures they might have experienced with the need to create a perfect painting image. Participating in art activities, creating artwork aids mental health and reduces stress levels (Jensen & Bonde, 2018; Liu et al., 2024).

Before providing instructions on the painting activity, the mothers were introduced to a four-square mindfulness breathing technique. The researcher facilitated the breathing technique and provided psychoeducation about mindfulness. The mothers were encouraged to embrace their creativity. While painting, the researcher provided positive affirmations and encouragement to the mothers to use the painting colors of their choice and to add any variations to their drawn images. Encouraging mothers to be in the present moment while embracing their creativity stimulates ideas and actions, allowing them to expand their imagination (Angood, 2023; Dias & Marinho-Araujo, 2023; Tan & Tan, 2023).

## Results

### *Descriptive findings*

The mothers who attended the Moms Empowerment Workshop learned strategies to help them relax and reduce their stress levels. Most of the mothers had school-aged children, were between the ages of 44-50 years old, and all of them resided in Southern California. Table 1 includes the descriptive demographic information of the mothers.

### *Mental health levels and the art intervention*

The mothers shared their experiences of the mindfulness painting activity and their ability to connect with other women who shared the same identity. All of the mothers who participated in the structured interviews reported they enjoyed the mindfulness painting activity and

**Table 1.** Frequency table for nominal variables.

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
29–39	4	16.7
40–50	10	41.7
51–61	6	25.0
62–72+	4	16.7
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	24	100.00
Missing	0	0.00
Practice Self-Care		
Yes	16	66.7
No	7	29.2
Missing	1	5.56
Employment		
Full-time (35–40+ h)	13	54.2
Retired	5	20.8
Part-time (1–34 h)	3	12.5
Unemployed or not working	3	5.56
Age of Children		
Adult (18+ years)	16	66.7
Minors (17 years or younger)	8	33.3
Missing	0	0.00

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

found it fun, relaxing, and calming. From the qualitative data, Monique shared that “*The painting activity was fun, just having a moment where you are sitting and doing something.*” Nikki shared “*I enjoyed the present moment.*” Iris stated that she enjoyed “the opportunity to paint being in the midst of other women,” and Stephanie shared, “*It was just really relaxing.*” Additionally, Tanisha described her experience as, “It was fun, just painting, mingling, meeting new people and networking at the same time, learning life skills.” The overwhelming theme among the mothers of this mindful painting activity was that they experienced having a sense of *safety* and *belonging*.

### **Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) to measure flourishing mental health**

On the MHC-SF scale, most mothers,  $n=15$  (62.5%), scored in the flourishing range for positive mental health levels. Whereas eight (33.3%) scored not flourishing, there was one missing response. Twenty-two (91.7%) of the mothers reported they practiced weekly self-care strategies, whereas only two (8.3%) did not. The majority of the mothers who attended the Moms Empowerment Workshop demonstrated positive mental health prior to their participation, which may have contributed to their positive descriptions

of the mindful painting activity in a community-based setting.

The mothers shared that being around other mothers who looked like them and hearing how they were dealing with the same challenges helped them feel “less alone,” allowed them to be open and share their own experiences. Further, they shared that it was great “*just hearing the other women’s life stories and their testimonies, and like just connecting with other women since I’m a stay-at-home mom, I do feel isolated sometimes, you know,*” stated Stephanie.

### **Mothers’ responses and shared experiences**

At the beginning of the Moms Empowerment Workshop, the mothers were seated at tables in groups of four and were encouraged to get to know one another through the icebreaker activity facilitated by the researcher. This allowed the mothers to connect with one another, with the goal of strengthening and creating lasting relationships. The mothers described their experiences and shared their stories, with the majority (86%) reporting they enjoyed interacting with other mothers and felt connected. Tanisha shared that she found “*Painting with other women and being able to talk to them and having that product afterwards that you made beautiful*” to be a positive experience. Nikki found “*Socializing with other women*” to be enjoyable. Stephanie stated it was “*great interaction with other women*” and “*I got to connect with other women. I feel like there’s a certain energy that women bring, um, the positivity,*” shared Jasmine about her experience.

Smiles were seen on the majority of the mothers’ faces as they painted their image and spoke about different activities they engaged in as young girls. The environment at the workshop appeared relaxed, with interactive conversations and strong connections forming between the mothers. Many mothers had only met one another on the day of the event. Monique said she “*liked being able to connect with other women because I don’t get to meet new people and connect and socialize within the community as much.*” The mothers reported they enjoyed painting the image, adding their own creativity to it, that they found the activity relaxing, a positive stress reliever, and felt connected

with other mothers. Iris shared that she liked “being in the midst of other women. To know that I wasn’t alone.” Figure 1 provides a completed painting of the different images the mothers were provided to paint. Figures 2–5 are of the semi and incomplete canvas paintings to illustrate the images the mothers colored.

Lastly, some of the mothers shared that they found the breathing exercises helped identify their stress levels and to relax. Raquel shared that, “we’re stressed out, so it helped me to like kind of stop at least for a minute,” Iris shared the

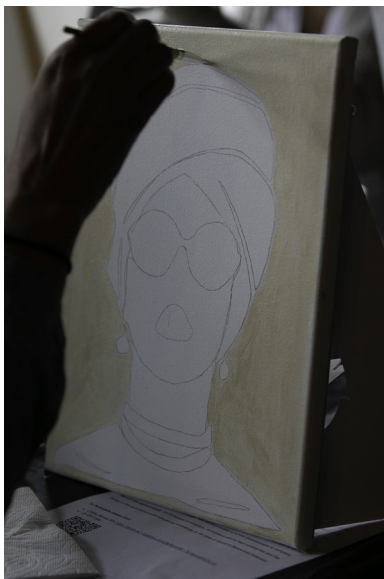
breathing exercise “helped me, just an opportunity to kind of de-stress, like to just relax,” and Stephanie shared that “it was just really relaxing, for you had us like take a deep breath like we were doing the square breathing and after doing that I felt even more at peace, and I felt as deeper calmness within myself.” Additionally, Aubrey shared that she found the breathing exercise helped to identify “tension in my shoulders and different places that I didn’t even realize and you doing the exercise with us as whole” and that she found it to be helpful.



**Figure 1.** Completed visual image of the three painting options the mothers had to choose from.



**Figure 2.** Paintings in their incomplete stage that two of the mothers worked on during the mindfulness painting activity.



**Figure 3.** One of the mothers of the Moms Empowerment Workshop painting the pre-drawn image that she chose out of the three painting options.



**Figure 4.** One of the mothers of the Moms Empowerment Workshop putting the finishing touches to the painting image that she chose.





**Figure 5.** One of the mothers from the Moms Empowerment Workshop is midway finished painting the predrawn image.

## Discussion

The mothers who attended the Moms Empowerment Workshop two years after the global COVID-19 pandemic had flourishing levels of positive mental health and stated that they regularly practiced self-care. Using regular self-care practices reduces anxiety and stress levels and aids in positive mental health (Hasson, 2020). It was not anticipated that the mothers would exhibit positive mental health, given their isolation and disconnection from others during the lockdown restrictions. However, engaging in regular self-care practices served as a protective barrier against poor mental health.

The mothers described their experiences of having an African American mother who was a trained, Licensed Mental Health Art Therapist in a positive manner; they said it made them feel “safe” being in the present moment and experiencing their feelings. *“I wasn’t by myself, um, in all of the things that you know women feel, especially mothers feel,”* shared Iris, and Aubrey expressed that *“it was helpful having you walk us through exercise, you implemented.”* Sharing a cultural identity with the mothers strengthened their connection with the facilitator. The mothers reported feeling a sense of belonging and freedom to be themselves without having to explain certain African American colloquialisms, terms,

or phrases. Participating in a mindfulness painting activity facilitated by an African American Mental Health Art Therapist, in a community-based setting was positively received by all of the African American mothers.

## Limitations

Within research, limitations are elements of the study outside of the researcher’s control that may have a negative effect on the generalizability of the results (Gay et al., 2014). A limitation was the use of a purposive sample and the small sample size. Additional limitations involve the sample representativeness and generalizability of the findings due to the recruitment procedure. The researcher posted invitations for the event on limited social media sites (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram), which could have limited the chances of more individuals participating in the event who did not see the posting advertisements.

## Practical implications and recommendations

The mental health levels of the mothers who attended the Moms Empowerment Workshop were examined. The majority of the moms had flourishing positive mental health and identified using regular self-care practices. However, this study did not explore the specific types of self-care practices the mothers used that may have aided in their positive mental health levels. Future studies should explore the different types of self-care practices (i.e., journaling, setting boundaries, exercise, deep breathing, etc.) utilized by mothers who have flourishing positive mental health. Providing a safe space for African American mothers to connect with one another in a community-based setting while learning mental health strategies is needed, as it strengthens relationships and fosters community support. This study demonstrated that conducting community-based mindfulness painting intervention, facilitated by a mental health art therapist who identified with the target population created an empathetic and safe space for African American mothers and strengthened their connections with one another.

Providing mindfulness painting activities with African American mothers within their community

promotes belonging and positive engagement. Through the qualitative data, this study demonstrated that during times of uncertainty, the mothers made connections with one another and experienced a sense of belonging with those who shared their same cultural identity. Providing more community-based mental health services for African American mothers that incorporate art or painting is necessary to promote maternal health outcomes, address health disparities, create safe environments, and enhance a sense of belonging among resilient marginalized populations. Thus, addressing the mental health concerns and racial disparities in health outcomes, future studies should be conducted with participants from different ethnic backgrounds and explore if engaging in consistent self-care mindfulness activities has an impact on their mental health.

## Conclusion

In this mixed methods study, the results demonstrated that conducting a four-hour community-based mindfulness painting intervention at a Moms Empowerment Workshop for African American mothers promoted a sense of belonging, safety, and connectedness among the participants. They described their positive experiences from attending the Moms Empowerment Workshop. Mindfulness painting was found to decrease stress levels and proved to be a positive intervention technique that should be utilized more frequently to promote well-being and foster relational connectedness. In addition to art making, other art techniques such as performance art (spoken word/poetry, music, drama, dance, etc.) can provide a great way for African American mothers to express their emotions, release the stress of their daily responsibilities, and should be considered for future community-based interventions. This study offered a snapshot of an effective community-based intervention that practitioners and others can use to enhance the mental health of African American mothers while fostering psychological safety.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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