

Birthing Healthier Families
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Mood disorders are statistically the most common complication from pregnancy. Surprised? According to the experts at Massachusetts General Hospital, www.womensmentalhealth.org, approximately 50-80% of women experience baby blues, 10-15% experience postpartum depression or anxiety, and up to 20% experience some kind of pregnancy related mood disorder. These essential facts are often glossed over in exam rooms, childbirth classes, and other settings where women are seen throughout the perinatal period. And even if they are addressed, women still often attribute their symptoms to personal failings rather than admit that they are suffering. There are too many stories to recount here, but www.postpartumprogress.com will introduce you to countless women who suffered in silence.

To further complicate things, we cannot ignore the statistics that approximately 10% of men also experience postpartum depression., <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=185905>. Preparing men for this possibility helps to reduce stigma and increases the chances that they will access treatment for themselves.

So what can we as providers, educators, doulas and other professionals do about this? Can we be the answer to preventing perinatal emotional complications, a term coined by MotherWoman, www.motherwoman.org, in Western, MA? The answer is that we can be part of the solution; we can definitely ensure quick, appropriate treatment for families to prevent prolonged emotional discomfort. Emotional complications reflect an array of complex risk factors, and therefore I think I would be overstating to say we can prevent them fully. For a great professional introduction to these complex issues check out <http://www.mededppd.org/mothers/>. We all have a role to play in addressing this common pregnancy complication.

What I am proposing is that childbirth educators, doulas, and providers consider adding a focus on postpartum planning to their regular routines, as well as hearing and responding quickly to the approximately 20% women with pregnancy related mood disorders. According to women I have spoken to, their pregnancy symptoms were seen as a normal, expected part of pregnancy, but once they were seen in the postpartum period with debilitating symptoms, a retrospective of their pregnancy illuminates that their disruptive symptoms often started before the baby's birth. This illustrates the social stigma and embedded hurdles many women face in getting early, effective treatment.

Here are some ideas for how to get involved with raising awareness for perinatal emotional complications with families. Reach out to professionals within your community to chat about birthing healthier families.

- Make a postpartum plan with families a regular component of childbirth classes, doula visits, and/or provider visits. We are great at discussing birth plans, this is the logical next step for birthing families. This acknowledges that the postpartum period requires some planning to promote health for the new (or a newer version of the) family. For ideas on postpartum plans see www.dona.org or I have one on my website http://maragreen.com/Pregnancy_and_Postpartum.html. Also, I have a piece entitled Positive Postpartum Planning available there as well.
- Educate partners and birth support folks on signs and symptoms of perinatal emotional complications and provide concrete, written resources on where they can get help beyond calling their birth provider's office or their therapist. Postpartum International has lots of resources organized by state, <http://www.postpartum.net>. Many families forget the information,

so be sure to provide it in a take home packet in addition to reviewing it together. This act will get the conversation going.

- Highlight the importance of partners/birth supporters familiarity with these symptoms so they can initiate these conversations rather than waiting for a new mother to express her distress.
- Get familiar and comfortable with a mood assessment tool that will help you determine next steps. There are lots of great options out there. Work with a licensed professional to figure out the one most appropriate for your area of practice. Even just asking the questions invites women to share their experience.
- Please continue to remind families that all these emotional complications are treatable!

Mara Acel-Green, LICSW, has a private practice in Belmont, MA where she sees pregnant and postpartum women and their families. She can be found at www.maragreen.com. Check out postpartum.net for a full array of state-by-state resources.