



Mother and child , Papua New Guinea © 2012 Burnet Institute

Interventions to improve mental health in pregnancy and among women who have recently given birth in low- and middle-income countries

Jane Fisher¹, Priya Mannava² and Stanley Luchters^{1,2}

1: School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Australia

2: Centre for International Health, Burnet Institute, Australia

Key messages

- Educating pregnant women and mothers about their child's development, increasing their self-awareness of mental health and using problem-solving techniques can improve both maternal mental health and child health.
- Interventions using health workers and volunteers can address mental health disorders during pregnancy and after childbirth in low- and middle-income countries. Interventions should be culturally relevant and conducted in supportive environments.
- Further evidence about how maternal mental health care can be integrated with primary health care and scaled up in various settings in low- and middle-income countries is needed.

Poor mental health during pregnancy and after childbirth has adverse effects on a woman's participation and the growth and development of her child. In low- and lower-middle-income countries, it is estimated that around 16% of pregnant women and 20% of postpartum women are affected by a common perinatal mental disorder, including anxiety and depression.¹

Perinatal mental disorders are exacerbated by socio-economic factors including poverty, low education, gender-based violence and limited or no access to reproductive health services and commodities.^{2,3} These factors can be addressed.⁴

In high-income countries rates are significantly lower at 10% during pregnancy and 13% postpartum; the majority of these women receive treatment.^{5,6} Evidence from these countries shows that psychological interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy and interpersonal therapy are effective in assisting common perinatal mental disorders.^{7,8}

Stigma and low understanding of emotional needs are barriers to the uptake of mental health care. However, the single greatest barrier to mental health care in most low- and middle-income countries is limited and inequitably distributed human resources in health services.⁹

Perinatal mental health in low- and middle-income countries: what works?

Although perinatal mental health has not received as much attention in low- and middle-income settings, available evidence also supports the use of cognitive behavioural, problem-solving and educational techniques in these settings. This is shown in our recent review of 13 interventions in eight countries in Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean.¹⁰

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Several key findings emerged from the review:

- Acceptable and affordable interventions can be undertaken in low- and middle-income countries to address mental health disorders during pregnancy and after childbirth.
- Interventions that educate mothers in a supportive context, for example through peer support groups or with involvement of the family, decrease the likelihood of maternal depression.
- Interventions involving cognitive behavioral therapies to identify and modify maladaptive thinking styles and to improve emotional literacy and regulation also decrease the likelihood of maternal depression.
- Delivery of mental health interventions in primary care and community settings using general health workers who are not specifically trained as mental health care professionals is feasible through short training courses with ongoing supervision.
- Interventions that focus on improving care for infants, including techniques to engage and stimulate the baby, and encouraging expressions of affection to the infant, are beneficial to the mother-infant relationship, maternal mental health and child health and development.

Policy recommendations

- Integrate maternal mental health care within primary maternal and child health care. Where human resources are limited, this can include using health workers and volunteers to provide mental health care in the community.
- Address training and supervision requirements for health workers and volunteers to deliver mental health interventions using cognitive, problem-solving or educational techniques.
- Integrate components to address socioeconomic risk factors, including poverty reduction and violence prevention strategies, in maternal mental health interventions.

While the review has shown that psychological interventions can improve maternal mental health, further evidence on integration with primary health care and scaling up programs in various settings in low- and middle-income countries is needed.

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For further information please contact

Jane Fisher: jane.fisher@monash.edu

Stanley Luchters: sluchters@burnet.edu.au

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