

National Perinatal Association: The Hidden Side of Maternal Mental Health

Cristal Grogan

The National Perinatal Association (NPA) is an interdisciplinary organization that strives to be a leading voice for perinatal care in the United States. Our diverse membership is comprised of healthcare providers, parents & caregivers, educators, and service providers, all driven by their desire to give voice to and support babies and families at risk across the country.

Members of the NPA write a regular peer-reviewed column in Neonatology Today.



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It has been debated that there are over 27 categories of emotions that the human population experiences over their lifetime. Unlike islands that operate individually, these categories of emotions interweave and overlap as we move throughout our

day and experience all life throws at us. As we all know, emotions are a natural and necessary part of life, but when emotions become too intense or difficult to manage, they can lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Research has begun to highlight that a mother’s emotional wellbeing is vital for their child’s healthy development. Nevertheless, discussions surrounding maternal mental health remain a topic that is tiptoed around and often ignored until an outburst or breakdown is experienced that forces intervention by a care team.

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However, public breakdowns do not always happen. In our society, mental health concerns are often hidden and swept under the rug out of fear, shame, embarrassment, and so much more. The topic of mental health has historically been stigmatized and taboo in many cultures and societies. This can be attributed to various reasons, including cultural and social beliefs, lack of understanding and education about mental health, fear of discrimination, and a tendency to view mental illness as a sign of weakness or personal failing. We need to start talking about maternal mental health openly and honestly. We must show understanding and empathy if we want to create a more supportive and accepting society for those struggling with mental

health challenges. There has to be a better way.

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As a mother who has experienced two high-risk pregnancies, two premature births, the death of one child, and the raising of a child with complex medical needs, it is safe to say that I have faced a tornado of emotions head-on during my journey. I have celebrated the highs, been brought to my knees with the lows, and have swum through the waters of the in-betweens; never quite knowing what I will face next. Throughout my journey, maternal mental health has remained a topic that is often overlooked and often unacknowledged. I am a parent who has always presented themselves as educated, emotionally stable, organized, and able to research and process information accordingly. Moreover, although I have been able to carry myself well, I am also the parent who has silently cried in more showers than I can count, who has dealt with suicidal ideation, crippling anxiety, depression, and more private mental breakdowns than I will ever be brave enough to admit.

One of the most significant challenges mothers like me face is the lack of mental health resources. Many women struggle to access affordable and appropriate mental health services, especially for marginalized communities, such as low-income and rural populations. This lack of resources can severely affect mothers and their child(ren). It is becoming increasingly clear that addressing mental health concerns follow-

ing a diagnosis and early on is crucial to prevent long-term adverse effects for both mother and child. This brings yet another level of need, making this a next-to-impossible endeavor to address alone without systematic change.

It is also vital to note that the impact of maternal mental health issues may be vastly different depending on the person's social, economic, and financial circumstances. So, although everyone is experiencing the same storm, some are in vastly different boats than others. Furthermore, our greatest strengths often become our most significant weaknesses in those boats. Resilience can turn into stubbornness. Independence can turn into isolation. Perfectionism can turn into burnout.

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For example, mothers highly dedicated to their children's wellbeing may become so focused on their parenting role that they neglect their self-care and mental health needs. This can lead to burnout, exhaustion, etc. On the other hand, mothers who are resilient and able to adapt to change may be better equipped to handle the challenges of motherhood, but they may also feel pressure always to be strong and not ask for help when needed.

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So, what can we do? How do we begin to change such a broken system? It is essential to increase access to mental health resources for mothers. To address this issue. This can include:

- Funding for research and treatment programs
- Improving insurance coverage
- Increasing awareness and education
- Involving and supporting partners and families
- Addressing systemic inequalities

- Screening for mental health issues during and after pregnancy

It is important to keep working towards reducing the stigma surrounding maternal mental health and increasing access to resources and support to help people feel comfortable seeking help when needed. Meaningful progress and care transformation can only be achieved through proactive and intentional behavior, processes, or systems changes. Remember that mothers' wellbeing is the foundation of healthy families, strong communities, and a prosperous society. By prioritizing maternal mental health, we are investing in the present and securing a brighter future for future generations.

Disclosure: The National Perinatal Association www.nationalperinatal.org is a 501c3 organization that provides education and advocacy around issues affecting the health of mothers, babies, and families.

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