



REVIEW ARTICLE

An evaluation of perinatal mental health interventions: An integrative literature review

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ABSTRACT

Background: National statistics related specifically to the mental health of women in the perinatal period is poorly acknowledged in Australia. Maternal deaths related to mental health in the perinatal period can be attributed to a lack of appropriate treatment and/or support. A barrier to women's help-seeking behaviors is the lack of discrete, perinatal specific interventions where women can self-assess and access support.

Aim: This review examines original research evaluating perinatal mental health interventions used by women to improve mental health.

Method: An integrative literature review was undertaken. A comprehensive search strategy using 5 electronic databases resulted in the retrieval of 1898 articles. Use of an inclusion and exclusion criteria and Critical Appraisal Skills Program tools resulted in 4 original research papers. Thematic analysis identified universal themes.

Findings: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Behavioral Activation and Mindfulness-based interventions, specifically adapted to meet the needs of women in the perinatal period, demonstrate an overall improvement in mental health. Women involved in the interventions experienced both improvements in symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as secondary benefits from participating in the research. **Conclusion:** To improve perinatal mental health outcomes, innovative modes of providing effective perinatal mental health interventions that address the unique needs of women in the perinatal period are needed. Future development of perinatal mental health interventions require adaptations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Behavioral Activation and/or Mindfulness-based methods to address mental health outcomes for women in the perinatal period.

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Summary of relevance

Problem/issue

Perinatal mental health is a prevalent issue for childbearing women in society and is poorly recognised or acknowledged. Non-pharmacological treatment options exist, however there is a lack of available evidence regarding the efficacy of such interventions.

What is already known

Mental health affects a significant number of people in today's society. Compared to the general public, the perinatal period has its own specific challenges with regard to mental health issues.

What this paper adds

This paper highlights the issues surrounding perinatal mental health and explores current evaluation of treatment interventions used by women to improve their mental health.

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1. Introduction

Mental health in Australia continues to be a concern in today's society, with approximately 45% of the general population facing longstanding mental health issues and around 20% suffering any form of mental illness over a 12-month period.¹ Australian women are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues (in comparison to males) with current statistics indicating a rate of 22% of women experiencing some form of mental health issue compared to 18% for males.¹ Women in the perinatal period have a 10% chance of experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression, with 9% suffering from antenatal depression and 16% developing postnatal depression.² Maternal mental health statistics also indicate 15.2% of childbearing women in Australia experience illnesses related to poor mental health and the deaths of 1 in 136 mothers (from 2008 to 2012) were attributed to inadequate management of mental health issues during the perinatal period.³ National statistics related specifically to the mental health of women in the perinatal period is poorly acknowledged, with statistics concentrating on the general female population.¹ Additionally, the criteria used to diagnose mental health disorders, fails to distinguish between 'depression' and 'postnatal depression', adding to the poor recognition of women in the perinatal period.⁴

Maternal deaths in Australia related to mental health issues in the perinatal period have been attributed to a lack of appropriate treatment and/or supportive assistance.³ The incidence of maternal deaths in Australia connected with psychosocial problems (an average of 12 deaths per year) has been shown to have a similar prevalence as maternal deaths due to an obstetric haemorrhage.³ These statistics emphasise the need for an improvement in the detection, management and early treatment of maternal mental health issues.

Barriers to seeking mental health support have been shown to incorporate both structural and attitudinal obstacles, whereby individuals with mental health issues either decide to stop treatment or resist attempts to seek help.⁵ Economic adversity, geographic remoteness and inaccessibility of services can be perceived as potential structural barriers to seeking mental health treatment.⁵ Attitudes held by individuals may include believing they do not have a mental health problem, having a perception of being judged negatively if they disclose a potential mental health disorder, preferring not to be offered pharmacological solutions, having experienced negative assistance in the past and feeling what they are experiencing is not serious enough to seek help.⁵ Women in the perinatal period may develop emotional distress from a variety of sources including variations in hormone levels, unwanted advice from individuals, social influences on their role as a mother and/or parent, perceived negative opinions of others and minor discomforts related to pregnancy.^{6,7}

Pharmacological treatment remains the preferred method within the healthcare system for mental health issues, however behavioral and/or alternative therapies that compliment pharmacological methods are emerging.⁸ In today's age of technology, online mental health information and support websites are also a valuable and appealing way for individuals to carry out their own research about mental health issues, explore care options available and access information autonomously without the fear of disclosure.^{9,10} However, the quality of open access sites is problematic. A study by Moore and Ayers¹⁰ examining mental health websites reported there is a lack of research regarding how websites are evaluated for quality and efficacy.

In pregnancy, women are increasingly exploring the use of alternative therapies that focus on the connections between the mind and body to assist with physical and emotional wellbeing.¹¹ Anxiety reducing therapies in pregnancy (such as meditation, yoga,

hypnotherapy, tai chi, and other methods of relaxation) have been shown to improve emotional wellbeing. However more research is needed to find a direct correlation between the use of alternative therapies and the prevention of anxiety and/or depression within the perinatal period.^{11,12}

Group education interventions for expecting couples is another method of providing information about the stresses associated with the changing demands related to transitioning to parenthood. These interventions offer both a supportive group environment and individual methods of dealing with physical and emotional issues during this stage of their lives. Parenting interventions provided in a group environment have shown to provide short-term positive emotional health effects. Further research and development of these interventions are needed to maintain the positive effects of emotional wellbeing for a sustained period.¹³

This integrative literature review examines current evidence related to the evaluation of perinatal mental health interventions used by women in the perinatal period to improve their mental health. This review defines the 'perinatal period' as the period from conception through to 12 months post-birth.

2. Methodology

This review utilises an integrative literature review methodology framework as described by Whittmore and Knafl.¹⁴ Integrative literature reviews encapsulate original experimental and non-experimental research on a specific subject to provide an all-encompassing understanding of the topic question. The broader understanding of the phenomenon available through an integrative review also allows for multiple realities to be presented.¹⁴ Whittmore and Knafl outline a five-stage strategy for an integrative literature review that includes problem identification, literature search, evaluation of data, analysis of data and presentation of results/findings.¹⁴

2.1. Problem Identification

The mental health of women in the perinatal period continues to be a concerning issue in society. Perinatal mental health interventions currently exist, however there is a paucity of available research evaluating the effectiveness of such interventions. In order to evaluate the use of perinatal mental health interventions used by women to improve their mental health, three research questions were formulated. These questions were used to focus the integrative literature review:

1. 'What current perinatal mental health interventions have been evaluated with regard to improvements in mental health outcomes for women in the perinatal period?'
2. 'What are women's experiences in utilising evaluated mental health interventions in the perinatal period to enhance mental health outcomes?'
3. 'What measurements are used to determine improvements in existing perinatal mental health interventions?'

2.2. Literature search

The search strategy was aimed at supporting the evaluation of perinatal mental health interventions used by women to improve their mental health. Key search terms (see Table 1), in conjunction with Boolean operators, truncation and synonyms were used to source articles. The following online databases were used to search current literature concerning the evaluation of current mental health interventions for women in the perinatal period – Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature

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