

Barriers to Optimal Social Support in the Postpartum Period

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the specific barriers to mothers' realization of social support during the first-year postpartum.

Design: A qualitative approach in which social support data were analyzed thematically.

Setting: An urban medical center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Participants: Thirty-one women who had given birth in the year prior to study enrollment were recruited through posted flyers at multiple community sites.

Methods: Data were collected during three focus groups. The data that related to social support were extracted from a larger qualitative data set and analyzed separately for prominent social support inhibitors.

Results: Major themes that emerged were availability of trustworthy child care, cost of child care, demands of infant care, changing priorities, a transient population, and availability of family.

Conclusions: Emergent barriers to social support such as the demands of infant care and changing priorities are likely challenges for women regardless of socioeconomic status. However, the volume of text related to availability (proximity) of family, availability of trustworthy child care, and the consequences of a transient lifestyle may be attributed to the composition of the study sample.

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Social support for mothers during the postpartum period is critical for optimal maternal and family well-being (Emmanuel, St. John, & Sun, 2012; Ohasi & Asano, 2012). The transitional year after childbirth is challenging and entails multiple physical and psychosocial changes (Hung, Lin, Stocker, & Yu, 2011; Webb et al., 2008). The related demands often exceed women's expectations (Logsdon, Wisner, & Pinto-Foltz, 2006) as well as introduce considerable stress to the mother (Jevitt, Groer, Crist, Gonzalez, & Wagner, 2012) and the family unit as a whole. Specifically, parents face physical and mental adjustments and added responsibility in the postpartum period (Razurel, Bruchon-Schweitzer, Dupanloup, Irion, & Epiney, 2011). Parents must integrate the tasks related to care giving into their often hectic lives (Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach, Terry, & Wisniewski, 2010). Although the birth of a child can affect the entire family unit, mothers are often the primary caregivers (Logsdon et al., 2006) and handle the majority of the work, including infant feedings and pediatric appointments. The task of juggling the role of mother with other roles such as wife, employee, friend, and family member is formidable

and can contribute to feelings of strain (Mercer, 2004). Maternal fatigue, which affects the body's stress response (Groer, Davis, & Hemphill, 2002), can persist into the child's second year of life (Parks, Lenz, Milligan, & Han, 1999) and compound the difficulty of the adjustment to motherhood.

Despite the impressive task that is postpartum adjustment, the research literature is primarily focused on the developmental needs of the child rather than the mother (Vejar, Madison-Colmore, & Ter Maat, 2006). In a focus group study of 31 new mothers the mother's care of and attention to herself was repeatedly cited as imperative (Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach, Terry, & Wisniewski, 2010, Barkin & Wisner, 2013) to maternal wellness and effective parenting in the postpartum. Regardless, fulfillment of the mother's needs is often omitted from instruments that assess maternal wellness (Barkin & Wisner, 2013; Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach, & Wisniewski, 2010).

Social support is a postpartum need, as it assists the mother in meeting the aforementioned

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challenges (Negron, Martin, Almog, Balbierz, & Howell, 2012). Broadly defined, social support includes those functions provided by interpersonal relationships that supply emotional nourishment, companionship, information, and/or instrumental assistance with goods, services, and tasks (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Boothe, Brouwer, Carter-Edwards, & Ostbye, 2011). Social support is a modifiable factor (Surkan, Peterson, Hughes, & Gottlieb, 2006) in most instances and warrants further attention. Increased focus on social support is necessary due to the established and inverse relationship between social support and postpartum depression (Hahn-Holbrook, Schetter, Arora, & Hobel, 2013; Ritter, Hobfoll, Lavin, Cameron, & Hulsizer, 2000). The period prevalence of postpartum depression is 21.9% during the first postpartum year (Gaynes et al., 2005), making depression a common postpartum condition with negative consequences for mother and child. Depression is related to interactional disturbances and disruption in caregiving activities such as breastfeeding, sleep routines, safety practices, and well-child visits (Field, 2010). The identification of prevalent barriers is a first step in affecting women's access to social support. Affecting access is likely to have a positive influence on rates of postpartum depression.

Surkan et al. (2006) provided evidence of a relationship between social network availability and social support to a reduction in symptoms of depression. More broadly, social support has been described as a buffer during periods of stress and transition (Hung, 2004). The presence of social support is particularly important among minority, low-income, and adolescent populations. In a study of 248 pregnant and postpartum low-income Hispanic women, social support and greater relationship quality with a partner were related to a reduction in feelings of stress (Mann, Mannan, Quiñones, Palmer, & Torres, 2010). A study of pregnant teenagers by Barnett et al. (1996) followed from the third trimester through the first 4 months postpartum revealed an association between social support from the adolescent's mother and lower rates of postpartum depression. Also related to the mental health of the adolescent was the quality of the relationship with the infant's father. Results of a longitudinal study of depres-

sion symptoms and social support in adolescent mothers (Brown, Harris, Woods, Buman, & Cox, 2012) suggested that effective long-term interventions are needed to lessen depression and enhance social support.

Despite the apparent importance of social support to overall well-being and mental health in particular (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Pender, Murdaugh, & Parson, 2006), it is not always easily realized. Factors such as decreased traditional assistance and a growing number of working mothers can contribute to feelings of isolation (Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012). Although barriers to depression treatment are discussed in the literature (Dennis & Chung-Lee, 2006; Goodman, 2009), there is scant research citing specific obstacles to postpartum social support, which will likely differ by socioeconomic status. In this study, we examined the barriers to obtaining adequate social support as reported by a focus group study of 31 new mothers (Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach, Terry, & Wisniewski, 2010). The mothers identified the key facets of social support as being help from friends and family with infant care tasks, adult interaction for the mother, and verbal encouragement from other adults (Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach & Wisniewski, 2010). This analysis focused on elucidating the obstacles to these facets. A clear understanding of the barriers women encounter in the postpartum period is an important step in addressing social support deficits.

Methods

Design

This descriptive qualitative study is a secondary analysis of data collected in a study that examined maternal functioning after birth. Details regarding the methods of the parent study including the recruitment process, composition of the study sample, and the focus group discussion questions have been previously reported (Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach, Terry, & Wisniewski, 2010; Barkin, Wisner, Bromberger, Beach, & Wisniewski 2010; Barkin & Wisner, 2013). Approval from the University of Pittsburgh's Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to participant recruitment.

Setting and Participants

Study flyers were posted throughout the University of Pittsburgh and in local daycare facilities, health clinics, hospitals, and schools. All recruitment took place in Allegheny County that is located in

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