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Case series study

Effect of a web-based positive psychology intervention on prenatal well-being: A case series study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Detrimental effects of women's negative feelings during pregnancy have been extensively examined and documented, but research on the influence of positive feelings and protective factors on their prenatal mental health is scarce. Evidence from the positive psychology field has shown that practicing some brief positive exercises, called positive psychology interventions, can maximize well-being by increasing positive emotions, engagement, and meaning.

Aim: The aim of this study is to examine the effect of a positive psychology web-based intervention on indices of women's prenatal well-being.

Methods: Specifically, a case series design was adopted, and data from six women are presented. Participants were involved in a 5-week online positive psychology intervention that includes a set of positive psychology interventions specifically adapted for pregnant women. Measures of women's mental well-being, depression, pregnancy-related anxiety, life satisfaction, and social support were measured at pre- and post-intervention. Compliance with the intervention and exercise preferences were assessed at post-test. Single-item related well-being measures were assessed weekly.

Findings and discussion: The findings of this case series study indicate potential effects of the intervention on supporting mental well-being and decreasing depressive symptomatology in these pregnant women. Furthermore, this study provides some suggestions for developing future online-based positive interventions addressed to pregnant women. However, these findings are preliminary, and future studies are needed in order to assess the effects of the intervention in a wider population of pregnant women.

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Statement of significance

Problem

The detrimental repercussions of negative feelings during pregnancy have been extensively examined and documented, whereas interventions aimed to support and maximize maternal prenatal well-being are scarce.

What is already known

Recent studies suggest that positive maternal mood can buffer the effects of negative feelings and promote maternal and infant well-being. Evidence from the field of positive psychology has shown the effects of positive psychology interventions on maximizing well-being in general and depressed populations.

What this paper adds

The findings of this case series study indicate potential effects of a novel online positive psychology intervention on supporting women's prenatal mental well-being and decreasing depressive symptomatology.

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1. Introduction

Pregnancy is a time of change and demands, which can impact both maternal and infant well-being. The nature, prevalence, and detrimental repercussions of negative feelings (e.g., stress, depression, anxiety) during pregnancy have been extensively examined and documented. Pregnant women are more vulnerable to developing some psychological problems such as depression,¹ or anxiety disorders.² Furthermore, it has been estimated that 25% of women experience prenatal stress.³ Acute and chronic stressors for these women can be, for instance, worries about the baby's health and childbirth, concerns about physical changes, job-related stressors, and lack of perceived social support.⁴ Low women's prenatal well-being is also associated with preterm childbirth, low baby weight, and even difficulties in the neurocognitive development of the fetus and emotional regulation abilities during infancy and childhood.^{5,6} Therefore, because pregnancy is no longer considered an un-problematic period, it is essential to support and enhance mental well-being in pregnant women. This study contributes to a novel positive approach to pregnancy care, focused on the potential benefits of positive aspects (e.g. women's positive affect, positive life events) and protective factors (e.g., women's optimism, perceived social support) that can impact the course of pregnancy.

1.1. Positive prenatal well-being

Recent studies suggest that positive maternal mood can buffer the effects of negative feelings and promote maternal and infant well-being.^{4,7–10} In one study of 60 pregnant women, experiencing positive life events during the prenatal period significantly predicted lower morning cortisol in late pregnancy.⁹ Because the fetal programming hypothesis assumes that increased maternal cortisol during pregnancy can have a negative effect on fetal development, these findings indicate that prenatal positive life experiences can attenuate – or even totally buffer – the negative effects of adverse influences on pregnant women and the developing fetus.⁹ A recent study investigated whether women's positive affect in pregnancy could be a protective factor against postpartum depression.¹¹ Results showed that positive affect (i.e. frequency of experienced positive emotions) played a protective role, whereas negative affect was a predictor of postpartum depression. Maternal positive affect was also found to be associated with length of gestation and lowered risk of preterm birth.¹⁰ McManus et al.⁸ conducted the first study to examine the association between positive feelings and feeding practices. The results showed that positive maternal feelings during pregnancy were associated with better feeding practices, and that these feeding habits were associated with fewer common childhood diseases. The primary focus of psychological research on pregnancy has been on the role of social support.³ Women's perceived social support can buffer the negative effects of stress and depression.¹² Pregnant women who reported higher levels of social support also reported low indices of distress and uncertainty, a greater sense of control over pregnancy-related changes, and improved self-image.¹³ Women's perceived social support has also been associated with more optimal fetal movement, decreased risk of preterm birth, a better childbirth process (i.e., reduced labor length and birth complications, more spontaneous onset of labor, and natural childbirth), and higher birth weight.^{14,15} A growing number of studies has assessed the effect of mindfulness interventions on women's prenatal well-being. Findings from a recent systematic review indicate potential benefits of mindfulness interventions on women's well-being, especially for decreasing levels of negative affect, depression, and anxiety during pregnancy.¹⁶ Nevertheless, due to the variety of

research designs, gestational characteristics, timing of evaluations, and outcome measurements, improved methodological quality is necessary to accurately examine the effects of mindfulness interventions on women's prenatal well-being.¹⁶ Despite these promising findings, research on the influence of positive feelings and protective factors on women's prenatal mental health is still scarce.

Evidence from the field of positive psychology has shown that practicing some brief positive exercises, called positive psychology interventions (PPIs),¹⁷ such as counting one's blessings,^{18,19} writing gratitude journals,¹⁹ or writing about one's best possible self,²⁰ can maximize individual well-being in general and depressed populations by increasing positive emotions, engagement, and meaning.^{18,21} To the authors' knowledge, only one pilot study reported the effects of a gratitude and mindfulness intervention on women's prenatal stress, cortisol levels, and well-being indices, indicating potential direct effects of the intervention on reported stress in comparison to a treatment-as-usual control condition.⁷

1.2. Web-based intervention for prenatal mental health

In the past decade, web-based delivered interventions have been used to enhance the access to and effectiveness of traditional treatments (e.g., face-to-face treatments). Online interventions offer several potential advantages. They can overcome existing barriers, such as cost, service availability, waiting time, and transportation, and greater anonymity may encourage individuals to seek help and/or reveal more sensitive health information. Several meta-analyses have shown that web- or computer-based programs can be as effective as traditional face-to-face programs, and significantly more effective than control conditions, for a variety of mental health disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders) and across different populations.²² Indeed, a recent systematic review provides preliminary evidence that web-based interventions can be a promising and advisable form of intervention during the prenatal period.²³ Women can access the web contents of an intervention at no or minimal cost, and at the most convenient time and place for them. These advantages can be particularly suitable for pregnant women, taking into account the demanding schedule of coping with pregnancy and a new baby.²³ Furthermore, the anonymity offered by web-based interventions might help pregnant women to overcome the stigma of seeking and accessing help.²³ Preliminary evidence suggests that online positive psychology interventions (OPPIs) can effectively enhance well-being and reduce depressive symptoms,²⁴ but to the authors' knowledge, the effectiveness of OPPIs for pregnant women has not yet been investigated.

The aim of this study is to examine the effect of a novel positive psychology web-based intervention on indices of women's prenatal well-being. Specifically, a case series design was adopted, and data from six women are presented.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Pregnant women (in any week of pregnancy) who decided to keep the baby, Spanish or German speaking, and with regular Internet access, were invited to participate in the study. Six pregnant women were included in this study (see [Table 1](#)).

2.2. Measures

Participants provided information about age, country of residence, current week of pregnancy, previous children,

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