**The Crucial Intersection of Maternal and Mental Health in Ghana: Understanding, Support, and Advocacy**

Maternal health refers to the well-being of a woman during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period (World Health Organization, (n.d)). Understanding maternal health is crucial because it impacts not only the woman herself but also family dynamics and child development. Good maternal health is closely linked to mental health, which encompasses an individual's overall well-being and ability to manage life's stressors (World Health Organization, 2022). Maternal mental health is essential for the overall health of families. Ensuring women are safe and healthy before, during, and after pregnancy is vital for the well-being of future generations. There is a significant need in Ghana for improved safety measures and greater consideration of women's health, as many maternal deaths are due to medical neglect and a lack of education on these issues, which can often include excessive blood loss, infection, unsafe abortions, and indirectly connected issues such as malaria and heart disease (World Health Organization, (n.d)).

***Mental Health Challenges During Pregnancy***

Common mental health disorders that pregnant women may experience include depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These conditions may arise for the first time during pregnancy or worsen due to pregnancy. In Ghana, these conditions are often associated with hormonal changes, stress and life events, lack of social support, and preexisting mental health challenges. The prevalence of these disorders during pregnancy is significant, affecting a considerable number of women all around the world. These mental health issues can have profound effects on both the mother and the baby, including increased risk of preterm birth, low birth weight, and developmental challenges for the child. Therefore, early identification and intervention are crucial to ensure the well-being of both the mother and the baby. Proper support and treatment in Ghana can lead to better outcomes and a healthier pregnancy experience.

***Mental Health Challenges During Postpartum Period***

According to the Mayo Clinic, the top-ranking hospital in the United States as per the US News and World Report, mental health disparities in postpartum women can manifest in several ways, including Baby Blues, Postpartum Depression, and Postpartum Psychosis. In Ghana, these same mental health disparities are prevalent.

*Baby Blues*

Baby Blues typically occur a few days after childbirth, often around the fifth day, though they can appear sooner, particularly after a traumatic birth. Symptoms of Baby Blues include crying for no apparent reason, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, sadness, mood swings, and poor concentration. These symptoms generally resolve on their own within 14 days of childbirth (American Pregnancy Association, 2023).

*Postpartum Depression*

Postpartum Depression (PPD) is more severe and long-lasting than Baby Blues, affecting a woman's ability to function and care for her baby. Symptoms include intense sadness, severe mood swings, withdrawal from family and friends, difficulty bonding with the baby, and can include thoughts of harming oneself or the baby.

*Postpartum Psychosis*

Postpartum Psychosis is a rare but serious mental health condition that usually occurs within the first week after childbirth. Symptoms include confusion, hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, and attempts to harm oneself or the baby. Immediate medical attention is crucial for this condition. Understanding and recognizing these variations in postpartum mental health is essential for providing the necessary support and intervention for new mothers.

*How to take care of yourself: Treatment and Interventions*

There are many things that can be used for treatments and interventions at each level during the postpartum experience. If you are thinking that you may be having postpartum psychosis, the best thing to do is to seek medical attention, regardless if you are unsure if it is postpartum psychosis or not.

When it comes to postpartum depression, baby blues, and postpartum psychosis, it is important to note that if you ever feel like you are going to hurt yourself or your baby, you seek immediate help so that medical professionals are able to help you understand what is going on, and give you the proper treatment.

If you are not thinking about hurting yourself or others, there are other paths that can be beneficial when trying to work through postpartum and the baby blues. Oftentimes, support interventions can be helpful. A lot of the time, individuals can feel alone, and this can lead to depression. Having social support from your family and community can be vital to help these feelings. Peer support groups with other mothers who may be experiencing the same things as you can also be beneficial. Education and counseling to help you have a better understanding of why you are feeling the way you are feeling, and someone to directly help you assess your emotions can be beneficial. There are also more holistic and alternative approaches that could be helpful, including exercise (not pushing yourself too hard), mindfulness, meditation, and more. In Ghana, connecting to your culture and community can often be helpful with the baby blues, but sometimes, you will need to do this and be connected to other initiatives to really make a difference in how you are feeling.

If social support and holistic approaches are not effective for you, it may indicate the need for additional support. While this may seem daunting, it is more common than you might think. Although psychological therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy (IPT), are often stigmatized in Ghana, CBT, IPT, and pharmacological treatments like antidepressants can be beneficial. However, it is important to consider safety, especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

*Impact of Maternal Mental Health on Child Development*

Numerous studies have examined maternal mental health and its impact on children. Poor maternal mental health in Ghana and across the world can lead to children experiencing depression and anxiety, as well as difficulties in social situations (Crenna-Jennings, 2019). This may be due to the mother's lack of attachment and engagement with the child during her struggle with mental health issues (Crenna-Jennings, 2019). Additionally, poor maternal mental health can have long-term physical effects on the child, including impacts on weight, length, motor development, cognitive development, and sleep patterns (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2024).

***Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Care***

*Stigma and Cultural Factors*

When dealing with mental health problems in Ghana, it can be challenging to seek the support or help you need. Stigmas and cultural factors often discourage individuals, especially in minority communities, from seeking help or feeling they are unable to access the care they deserve. Recognizing the stigma surrounding mental health is important, as well as understanding the difference between temporary sadness and persistent mental health issues that may not improve on their own. However, it is crucial to know when it is time to seek mental health care. If you are hesitant to do so, confide in someone you trust, whether it be family or friends, to help you create a care plan and hold you accountable.

*Financial and Insurance Barriers*

Financial and insurance barriers when trying to find adequate mental health care are significant challenges that many people in Ghana face. High costs of therapy and medication, combined with limited access to affordable mental health services, can make it difficult for individuals to get the care they need. For those who are uninsured or underinsured, out-of-pocket expenses can be prohibitive.

Insurance barriers also play a major role, with insufficient coverage for mental health services, high co-pays, and deductibles. Many insurance plans have a limited network of mental health providers, making it challenging to find in-network care. Additionally, getting insurance approvals and authorizations for necessary treatments can be a complex and time-consuming process.

These financial and insurance barriers lead to delayed or avoided treatment, increasing the risk of untreated mental health conditions worsening over time. They also contribute to disparities in mental health care access among different socioeconomic groups. To address these issues, advocacy for policy changes to improve mental health coverage is essential. Expanding community mental health programs and implementing sliding-scale fee structures can help make services more accessible. Increased funding for mental health services and support programs is also crucial in ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to receive adequate mental health care.

*Education Barriers*

Many barriers in Ghana to accessing sufficient mental health care stem from a lack of accurate education on the topic. When people think about mental health, they often assume that an individual must be at their absolute breaking point to need help, but this is not always the case. People around you might be struggling with various mental health issues, and these issues can manifest differently for each person. It's important to recognize that if you are experiencing something that seems like a mental health concern, you are not alone. Even if mental health is not frequently discussed in your community, it doesn't mean the issue isn't present.

***Conclusion***

When considering the impacts of mental health on maternal health, we hope individuals can advocate for themselves. If they can't, the Alliance for Reproductive Health Rights is here to support you. We are here to help you understand the importance of your health rights and empower you to take control of your healthcare, ensuring you feel informed and confident when visiting the doctor.

Addressing maternal mental health in Ghana is crucial for the well-being of mothers, their children, and their families. Understanding the common mental health challenges that can arise during pregnancy and postpartum, recognizing the signs and symptoms, and knowing when and how to seek help are essential steps in promoting maternal mental health. We must work to eliminate the stigmas and barriers that prevent women from accessing the care they need. This includes improving education on mental health, ensuring affordable and comprehensive healthcare coverage, and expanding support networks within communities. Healthcare providers and policymakers also have a vital role to play. By prioritizing maternal mental health, they can implement policies and practices that support early detection, effective treatment, and ongoing support for new mothers. Fostering an environment where maternal mental health is acknowledged and addressed will lead to healthier families and stronger communities in Ghana.

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