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Study links domestic abuse to mental health problems in new mothers

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A new study shows that domestic abuse is closely linked to postpartum mental health problems, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in mothers. The research also found that specific types of abuse are associated with specific mental health problems. The work was done by researchers at North Carolina State University, Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia.

"We wanted to see whether and how intimate partner abuse – physical, psychological and sexual – influenced postpartum mental health in women, including problems such as depression, stress, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and PTSD," says Dr. Sarah Desmarais, an assistant professor of psychology at NC State and lead author of a paper on the work.

The researchers interviewed 100 women from British Columbia who were largely from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and were not considered at high risk of postpartum mental health problems. The study participants were recruited to participate in a broad health and wellness study, which was not specifically focused on domestic abuse.

Sixty-one percent of the study participants reported symptoms of postpartum mental health problems within the first three months after childbirth. And 47 percent of the 100 women reported symptoms at "clinical" levels, meaning the symptoms were of at least moderate severity.

Eighty-four percent of the participants reported experiencing physical, psychological or sexual abuse at the hands of a partner prior to becoming pregnant. Seventy percent of the 100 participants reported some form of abuse by their romantic partner during pregnancy. These forms of abuse ranged from name-calling to rape and physical assault with a weapon.

"We found that women who had experienced abuse were more likely to suffer from postpartum mental health problems, and were much more likely to suffer from those problems if the abuse occurred during pregnancy," Desmarais says. "In addition, the more types of abuse they experienced, the more severe the mental health symptoms they reported. We also found that specific types of abuse were associated with specific problems."

The researchers found that psychological abuse – verbal and emotional abuse – was associated with stress and PTSD. Physical abuse was associated with depression, OCD and PTSD. Sexual abuse was associated with stress, depression and PTSD.

This means that some mental health problems could stem from any of the forms of abuse. For example, PTSD is associated with all three forms of abuse, but could be caused by any one of them; psychological abuse alone could lead to PTSD.

"This highlights the need for increased awareness of the prevalence of these issues, and the need for increased screening for abuse and mental health problems for pregnant women and new mothers," Desmarais says.

"The sheer scope of the mental health problems and types of abuse that we found tells us that we need to take a broader approach to tackling these issues," Desmarais adds. "And this is clearly not a 'lower class' problem – medical professionals everywhere need to pay attention.

"But to do this effectively, we need to train doctors, nurses, and hospital staff in how to identify and respond to potential problems in this area."

More information: The paper, "Intimate partner abuse before and during pregnancy as risk factors for postpartum mental health problems," is published online in the open-access journal *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*. www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/14/132/abstract

Provided by North Carolina State University

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