

Can art therapy soothe angry mothers?

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Art therapy could be the perfect medium to help soothe women who may face a rollercoaster of extreme emotions during and after their pregnancy, according to new University of Derby research.

University academic Dr. Susan Hogan is an international expert in art therapy and has just written a chapter for a new book *Art Therapy and Anger!* on the [experiences](#) of [pregnant women](#) and new mums. The book is published by Jessica Kingsley Press, and contains a series of expert comments from different art therapists.

In the book, one new mum speaking about her experience of pregnancy and childbirth, said: “I don’t know on a theoretical level how they’re defining post-natal depression.

“They’re pathologising a response which might be in some ways utterly reasonable you know, if you’ve been in the equivalent to being involved in a car accident...I really did feel as though I was in shock.”

A Professor in Cultural Studies and Art Therapy Dr Hogan ran a series of art therapy workshops for new mothers and interviewed them about their pregnancy and birth experiences with support from the maternity liaison unit of a local hospital, with assistance from UK National Childbirth Trust.

Dr. Hogan said: “Art therapy is an excellent medium in which new mothers can express strong emotions, which range from loss of their former self, guilt and anger and resentment.

“Lack of space, or a feeling of having lost a sense of personal space, was a prominent theme, so the space on a blank page provided by the use of art therapy was very relevant to the women.

“Themes of loss of self and personhood, or a disrupted sense of selfhood translated into the images they created. The pictorial space also afforded an opportunity for the reconstruction of a lost sense of self. This vital process of readjustment was aided by art therapy.”

In various scenarios, findings reflected the trauma felt by new mothers in different situations:

- **Childbirth:** One woman likened her emergency episiotomy (a surgical procedure) to a ‘mutilation’ and a ‘kind of rape...’ feeling ‘betrayed’ by her partner who had not prevented the unwanted intervention.
- **Breast-feeding:** One woman was filled with resentment about being told to breastfeed by experts who had never breastfed their babies.
- **Depression:** A mother told her psychologist what she thought he wanted to hear, through fear of not receiving the help and understanding she needed.

Dr. Hogan says the endocrine (hormone) changes after childbirth have been described as ‘unmatched’ by any other biological event. Indeed, the body’s craving for steroid hormones, such as oestrogen and progesterone have been likened to the withdrawal effects experienced in giving up alcohol or heroin, according to some of her previous research.

She says: “This, combined with possible disappointment, or a tangible sense of having been violated, being in a state of shock, pain, discomfort or disorientation, is what is often rather condescendingly referred to as ‘baby blues’.

“I think ‘post-birth trauma’ describes it rather better.”

Other areas are explored such as unsympathetic work colleagues and managers following a return from maternity leave, and the influence of peers and family members whose good intentions may seem like unwanted interference.

Dr. Hogan also discusses mothers’ experiences of the birth plans they had made, often with their partners, which had then been given to the midwife.

She said: “The reality is that hospital rules often take over; even midwives in the home are constrained by hospital protocols.

“Women’s expectations of maintaining control over their own bodies and an important symbolic event, perhaps the defining one of their lives, are frequently bulldozed.

“The incredible anger women feel after having had a ‘bad birth’ is not always mitigated by the presence of a healthy child. Some women are simply too exhausted or traumatised to be able to enjoy their newborn infant. The pain of perineal tearing, episiotomy or Caesarean section is very real.

“And the mind-blowing fatigue of those giving two-hourly feeds all night is very difficult to imagine for those who have not endured it. The exhaustion is cumulative and may lead to immune deficiency, allowing infections, which then add to the exhaustion, making the early months of motherhood intensely demanding.”

Dr. Hogan acknowledges that it is hard to cover all the issues surrounding these complex topics in just one chapter, but says her research will be of interest to mothers, those concerned with women’s

issues and art therapists interested in working with new mums.

And she hopes her work helps “the medical profession to recognise the importance and long-term value of providing [emotional](#) support for women as part of standard ante-natal and post-natal care.”

Her other books include:

- Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy (1997);
- Healing Arts: Gender Issues In Art Therapy (2003)
- The Handbook of Art Therapy: A Guide to Experiential Teaching and Learning (forthcoming).

Professor Hogan is currently editing a book on women's issues and art therapy for Berg-Hahn Press, which will be out soon.

Provided by University of Derby

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