

Postpartum depression in the UAE

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Impact

Motherhood is a joyful experience, but it is not without challenges. As a mother adapts to the demands of caring for a new baby, she faces various psychological, physical, and social changes, which are often accompanied by a roller coaster of emotions: from joy to sadness, love to grief, comfort to loneliness, and so on. While it is normal to experience this wide range of emotions in the first two weeks after childbirth, their persistence beyond this period could indicate the development of postpartum depression. Unlike the "baby blues," which are temporary and mild, postpartum depression is a serious mental health condition that requires attention and support.

Postpartum depression affects one in seven women within the first year of childbirth. Failing to identify and treat it can lead to adverse consequences, affecting not only the mother, but also her infant and overall family dynamics. In addition, it may carry a significant economic burden at the national level. Despite this, postpartum depression has received negligible attention in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, the main problem lies in the country's mental health infrastructure, which has a significant dearth of mental health resources, support, promotion programs, and limited relevant scientific research. Therefore, the main aims of this thesis were to explore the current status of postpartum depression among women living in the UAE and propose an innovative approach to address it.

The findings revealed a considerable prevalence of postpartum depression in the UAE and shed light on the temporal variation in risk factors over the different stages of the postpartum period. We also found results consistent with recent studies suggesting the impact of a public health crisis (Covid-19) on the increased risk of developing postpartum depression. Specific contextual determinants of postpartum depression in the UAE were also underscored, including religion, cultural beliefs, financial status, accessibility to mental health resources, breastfeeding, social support networks, and telemedicine services. Furthermore, by delving into the nuanced experiences and needs of mothers following childbirth, we identified a range of unmet mental health needs and challenges faced by them in accessing adequate support and resources. For instance, there is a lack of attention to mental health from family and healthcare providers, limited breastfeeding support, and pressure from societal and personal expectations.

To address the second aim of this thesis, we carried out evidence synthesis on the effectiveness of technology-based interventions in preventing and mitigating postpartum

depression symptoms. Subsequently, to provide recommendations for future targeted digital interventions, we involved the population of interest (i.e., postpartum mothers) by exploring their digital usage patterns and perceived need for digital resources to support their postpartum journeys. We found that mothers are ubiquitous users of various digital platforms, primarily for seeking information and emotional support within online communities. However, they expressed their need for government-led digital platforms for reliable information, tailored telemedicine services, and expert-moderated online peer support forums.

Scientific impact

The foremost scientific impact of the present thesis is its endeavor to bridge the significant literature gap and advance knowledge on postpartum mental health in the UAE. It lays the foundation for future studies in the mental health field and advances research capacity in mental health, which is one of the objectives of the policy implementation processes of the National Policy for the Promotion of Mental Health in the UAE. It could also guide multidisciplinary stakeholders, such as scientific researchers, healthcare providers, and policymakers, to develop evidence-based recommendations and interventions, not only in the UAE but also in broader scientific and clinical communities. Additionally, the systematic evidence on digital interventions and specific resources enhances the understanding of the potential role of technology in supporting postpartum maternal mental health. The dissemination of the studies conducted through publication in peer-reviewed journals and presentations at local and international research conferences further contributes to the scientific community's knowledge sharing and offers opportunities for collaboration.

Societal impact

This thesis can have substantial impacts on various aspects of society. This illuminated the challenges faced by postpartum women in the UAE and their unmet needs. This, in turn, contributes to raising awareness of the significance of postpartum mental health, specifically postpartum depression, by promoting positive changes in cultural perceptions of mental health and reducing stigma within communities. Furthermore, by highlighting the multifactorial nature of postpartum depression, this thesis prompts multidisciplinary collective efforts to address maternal mental health in the UAE. First, it informs healthcare providers about the importance of being attentive to maternal mental health after childbirth. Second, it emphasizes the role of family members, particularly husbands, in supporting postpartum

women. Third, it supports policymakers in advocating for increased resource and funding allocation for postpartum mental health initiatives in the UAE. This may involve the implementation of standardized screening programs, mental health training for healthcare providers, health promotion campaigns, and development of culturally sensitive interventions to meet the needs of the diverse UAE population. Finally, given the continuous dedication of the UAE healthcare sector in fostering innovation, particularly digital health solutions, the findings on the promising effect of technology-based interventions on postpartum depression create opportunities for the evolution of mental healthcare infrastructure by overcoming barriers pertaining to insufficient mental health resources.

Activity

To ensure effective utilization of the knowledge gained from the research in this thesis and its translation into meaningful actions, active involvement and informed engagement with key target groups are imperative. Postpartum women represent the main population of interest; thus, efforts should be made to inform them about the findings in various forms, including public awareness campaigns, postnatal education initiatives, and targeted social media outreach. Given that many mothers rely on these platforms for information, leveraging them can foster positive help-seeking behaviors. Moreover, engaging with mothers' social networks through educational programs can serve as a valuable avenue to equip them with the necessary knowledge and resources to support maternal mental health during this vulnerable period. Healthcare providers play a crucial role in identifying and addressing postpartum depression and other mental health conditions. They can integrate research findings into their clinical practice through ongoing continuing education programs, which keep them updated on the latest research and evidence-based interventions. Finally, collaboration with policymakers, by providing them with research insights, could help them gain a deeper understanding of the significance of the problem and make informed policy decisions. This approach can lead to the development of evidence-based recommendations and interventions that can significantly affect the well-being of postpartum women and their communities.