Title: Depression in couples during pregnancy and postpartum: is there a concordance?

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Structured Abstract

Scope. An increase in mood disturbance in women during the pre- and postnatal periods has been well documented. However, research suggests that men experience a similar mood disorder to women at this time, although this is much less studied. Partner support has been suggested to play a role in the development of depression during pregnancy and postpartum. Consequently, if one partner is unable to offer support due to their own mood disorder, the impact on the other partner’s psychological functioning needs to be considered. Furthermore, research also suggests that parental depression increases in the first year after a child is born, suggesting that for undetermined reasons, mood vulnerability for new parents remains a concern long after the diagnostic criteria for postnatal depression purports. It has also been established that women with existing mental health issues, in particular anxiety are more susceptible to develop depression during these times. In addition, stress and coping style have also found to be influential in the onset of depression. Few studies have examined these factors on a lengthy longitudinal scale.

Purpose. The purpose of this study was to investigate mood concordance between couples during pregnancy and the postpartum period, while exploring changes to depression, stress and anxiety over time. Furthermore, this study attempted to identify predictors of depression throughout pregnancy and during the first year after birth.

Methodology. A repeated measures design was used, using self-report instruments examining demographic and psychological variables. Pregnant women presenting to General Practitioner surgeries in England were recruited with their partners (N=801 couples). Of those participants, 535 pregnancies resulted in a live birth, ensuing 535 couples available for the entirety of the study. Participants were requested to complete questionnaires that examined mood, anxiety, stress and coping via mail. The
questionnaires were delivered in Trimester 1 (time1), Trimester 3 (time2), 6 weeks postpartum (time3), 6 months postpartum (time4), and 12 months postpartum (time5).

**Results.** Pearson’s correlation showed there was no relationship between the moods of each member of the couple at any time. One-way repeated measures ANOVA’s demonstrated significant effects of sex and time on depression, with depression scores peaking at 6 weeks postpartum for women and 6 months postpartum for men, while time also showed a significant effect on stress and anxiety, with both peaking at 6 weeks postpartum. Stepwise linear regression identified the predictors of depression as sex, anxiety and stress.

**Conclusions.** This study failed to demonstrate a relational effect of mood between the members of each couple. However it is worth noting that the mean depression scores for both men and women did not qualify for a categorisation of “Major Depressive Disorder” and therefore did not meet the classification of postnatal depression that has been specified for women (men do not have a classification at this time). While depression scores continued to rise after birth, men appeared to continue to experience increments in the disorder when women’s scores commenced declining. This may suggest that as men continue to experience the pressures of a new baby and accommodating their partner’s elevated depression symptoms, their own resilience declines and depressive symptoms increased.

**Implications.** The findings of this study suggest that men experience a similar transition during pregnancy and postpartum to women, albeit in a somewhat different sequence. Although these results did not show clinically significant depression scores, nor an increase in depressive symptoms over the entire year after birth for either sex, men’s inclusion into mood disorder studies in the ante- and postnatal periods must be considered necessary. In addition, deliberation and review of the current classification
of postnatal depression must surely be warranted as this study adds to the growing body of research that suggests that women and men can experience depression for many months after the birth of a child.
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