

The benefit of community and family support during the perinatal period for Latina immigrants

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LATINA WOMEN ARE AT INCREASED RISK FOR DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY, with rates twice those of Latino men in the United States. Specifically, among immigrants, rates of depression and anxiety increase with the number of years lived in the United States. The perinatal period (during pregnancy and up to 12 months postpartum) is a time of heightened risk for depression and anxiety for Latina immigrants, with studies demonstrating prevalence rates of between 52-54%. Despite their higher risk for developing postpartum depression, Latinx mothers in the U.S. have lower rates of receiving mental health treatment compared with white mothers, indicating a vast number of mothers who are suffering from treatable mental health conditions. In addition to facing issues such as poverty and fear of being reported to immigration authorities, immigrant Latina mothers deal with mental health stigma, lack of access to culturally competent healthcare, and language barriers that prevent them from seeking help with mental health issues during pregnancy and postpartum.

While about 20% of all new mothers in the U.S. encounter symptoms of post-partum depression, the prevalence of post-partum depression in Latina immigrant mothers is estimated to be 3 to 4 times higher than non-Latina mothers. In the review and analysis of risk factors among Latinx mothers for postpartum depression, it has been found that social support, economic worries, and education



are important measures for determining whether postpartum depression may be present. When immigrant Latina mothers are undocumented, their risk for mental health issues is even higher because they cannot access the services and support that they need. Unfortunately, little is known about the factors that influence whether Latina immigrant mothers are more or less likely to suffer from postpartum differences, especially the influence of cultural factors such as values, beliefs, and traditional gender roles. Even less is known about the other mental health symptoms that Latina immigrant mothers are known to suffer from at higher rates than other mothers, including anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and chronic stress.

When discussing mental health for this population during the perinatal period, it is important to consider the impact of the experience of being an immigrant. High rates of trauma history have been documented among Latino immigrants. Immigrant mothers may have experienced family separation, wars in their country of origin, past sexual assault and, upon entering the U.S., a heightened experience of discrimination. These experiences have been evidenced as risk factors toward various mental illness symptoms and disorders, including depression. Less often discussed but just as critical to consider is the phenomenon of PTSD. According to Postpartum Support International, 9% of all women experience PTSD after childbirth. For

undocumented Latina immigrants, it is estimated that four times as many (34%) women meet the criteria for PTSD diagnosis. According to the George Mason University College of Public Health, violence during the migration period is a recurrent causal factor that leads to PTSD.

Although the statistics paint a daunting picture for immigrant maternal mental health, research also demonstrates the power of cultural beliefs and norms in the role of treatment seeking and decreasing symptoms. Among immigrant Latina mothers, culture has a strong influence on their health care decisions, with cultural beliefs, language, and cultural practices having the greatest impact. For example, the National Alliance for Mental Illness reported that in Latinx communities, depression may be stigmatized or considered a weakness. Mothers are often deterred from admitting symptoms if their family or community or clinic sees this as “complaining” and contradictory to a cultural belief that mothers easily and happily adjust to new roles. However, most research on postpartum depression has not looked closely at the role of cultural beliefs among Latina mothers to understand how they make sense of postpartum depression and to better understand the influence of cultural norms and beliefs. According to Sampson *et al.*, providers should be educated about the influence of cultural beliefs to better understand their clients’ struggles. The writes,



“Some cultural beliefs, such as familismo, seem to provide great support to mothers, while other beliefs, such as maternal self-sacrifice (marianismo) or traditional gender roles, result in mothers feeling ashamed, incompetent and alone” (p. 6).¹ Two recent studies revealed that various forms of social support (emotional, instrumental) reduced depression symptoms in the long term for mothers, and the impact of social and family support may be especially effective given how it aligns with the cultural values of help seeking and familismo. For U.S. and foreign-born immigrants whose cultural values include “familismo,” or embracing close family relationships, there were higher levels of support and decreased stress, and pregnancy anxiety compared to European-American pregnant mothers.

Focused efforts are needed to improve the ability for immigrant Latina mothers to access mental health treatment. For example, to help Latina mothers manage the cultural stigma associated with postpartum depression, research shows that familismo can become a protective factor for mothers’ mental health treatment. Research points to a need for increased community awareness and support as well as a shift to communal and family inclusion in the diagnosis and treatment of postpartum depression. If families and communities can learn to openly discuss the mental health issues of new

Latina mothers without shame or stigma, everyone will become more comfortable with talking about and seeking help for postpartum depression as well as anxiety and stress. In addition, home visiting programs are a promising solution for delivering mental health treatments to Latina mothers and reducing many barriers to treatment. For example, visiting mothers in their home environment allows providers to engage families and honor the cultural value of familismo in Latina communities.

In conclusion, Latina immigrants living in the U.S. are at higher risk for developing perinatal depression and anxiety, and they exhibit higher rates of PTSD than U.S. born Latinas and the general population. The mental health of Latina immigrants, especially during pregnancy and postpartum, should be highly valued, which means early screenings and interventions are a worthy investment. Extant research of the Hispanic/Latinx family experience supports approaches to mental health that are inclusive of cultural values such as respect, family, and leveraging the strength of the community to support mothers during vulnerable times.



¹ Sampson McClain *et al.* “‘You withhold what you are feeling so you can have a family’: Latinas’ perceptions on community values and postpartum depression”, en *BMJ Journals: Family Medicine and Community Health*, vol. 9, num. 3, (2021). Disponible en <<https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2020-000504>>.