

Postpartum Mental Health Care Needs

One in five pregnant and postpartum mothers in the United States deal with depression and anxiety disorders. The number rises to one in four in lower socioeconomic communities. Unfortunately, 75% of women who experience maternal mental health symptoms do not receive treatment, according to the Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance.

Some women try to deal with their depression on their own, while others fall into self-harm and/or destructive behaviors. Many of these individuals are unable to bond with their child the way they had envisioned. Few doctors or clinics are able to identify or treat mood and anxiety disorders during the perinatal period, which generally means the time before and after the birth of a child.

These disorders may appear as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder or psychosis. A mother might check on a baby every five minutes during the night or have manic mood swings, thinking and talking too fast. An untrained provider may blame stress or fatigue, while a caregiver with the right training would recognize the underlying mental health issues causing the anxiety and the potentially serious consequences for mother and child.

Ornst Bloomquist who struggled with postpartum anxiety, is co-founder of Moms Mental Health Initiative, a nonprofit which provides southeastern Wisconsin women suffering from such disorders peer support and a bridge to effective treatment. Moms Mental Health Initiative does everything it can to find the right help to meet the needs of a woman with a particular mental health condition.

The key is new mothers should not bear the burden of mental health challenges alone, according to Sheng Lee Yang, a licensed clinical social worker and executive director of Us 2 Behavioral Health Care in Appleton, WI. The organization is forming a new perinatal mental health training program for a wide range of care providers across Wisconsin.

Perinatal mental health is the leading cause of maternal mortality in Wisconsin, a fact that Dr. Christina Wichman has been drawing attention to for some time. Wichman is an OB-GYN and medical director of The Periscope Project at the Medical College of Wisconsin, a statewide program that provides resources to health care providers caring for pregnant and postpartum women struggling with mental health or substance abuse disorders.

Mental illness is the biggest cause of death for pregnant and postpartum women, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, with the riskiest time in the perinatal period occurs seven to 365 days after childbirth. Approximately 53% of all pregnancy-related deaths happen during this time frame.

National guidance from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends screening at least once during the perinatal period for depression and anxiety. Dr. Wichman advocates for providers to screen pregnant and postpartum women every time they have an appointment.

