

Shining a Light on Perinatal Depression

When pop star Britney Spears recently announced her new pregnancy, she also openly shared that she struggled with perinatal depression during a past pregnancy more than 16 years ago. In the social media post, Spears says “women didn’t talk about it back then” and that “some people considered it dangerous if a woman complained” when pregnant.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), perinatal depression is a mood disorder that can affect women during pregnancy and after childbirth regardless of age, race, income, culture, or education. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), one in seven women experience perinatal depression during pregnancy or in the first 12 months after delivery.

“It may occur sooner in the pregnancy if a patient has a history of major depressive disorder, general anxiety disorder, anxiety, depression, or even bipolar disorder. If they have these prior to pregnancy, it can definitely be heightened throughout their pregnancy or perinatal era, or postpartum period afterwards,” says Dr. Haley Ralph, an OSF HealthCare family medicine and prenatal care provider.

Perinatal depression, however, can also occur in women who do not have a history of mental illness.

“It is also possible for the first episode of depression to happen in the perinatal timeframe, so either during pregnancy or within 12 months after delivery. Sometimes that’s the first episode a woman has – and most of these first episodes can happen during the reproductive age,” Dr. Ralph explains.

Although breaking the stigma surrounding mental health has come a long way over the years, there is still a long way to go. Many women, especially, have been known to hide their mental health struggles for years – putting a smile on and carrying through their day while keeping their internal struggles private.

Dr. Ralph says paying attention to any mood changes during pregnancy is important and should be discussed with your provider.

“Those symptoms of poor sleep, appetite changes, irritability, and even decreased libido can be common symptoms that women might experience in the pregnancy or afterwards in the postpartum period, so sometimes they can kind of skate under our radar,” says Dr. Ralph.

Because many symptoms of perinatal depression can be overlooked as simply a bad day or nothing out of the norm for a pregnant woman, perinatal depression can sometimes go unnoticed and untreated until later on down the road. According to the NIMH, mothers with perinatal depression often experience feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and fatigue that may make it difficult for them to carry out daily tasks, including caring for themselves or others.

If you or your loved one is experiencing these feelings when pregnant, Dr. Ralph says being honest and confiding in someone you trust is important.

“It’s okay and brave to ask if you just need a little bit of assistance. If it’s a grandparent or your partner, just communicating with them – having open communication and saying ‘I’m really exhausted’ or ‘I’m really stressed out’ and asking them to come over to help. Or even if it’s just to come sit and talk with you just so you can get things off your chest,” Dr. Ralph advises.

Many women avoid or put off seeking help for perinatal depression especially when their prenatal care appointments show that mom and baby are both otherwise healthy. Feelings of hopelessness, stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and so on tend to get brushed aside as long as mom and baby’s physical health is intact. However, Dr. Ralph reminds women they do not need to suffer through their mental health struggles in silence.

“My number one advice is if you’re experiencing symptoms and are feeling overwhelmed, there is no shame to reach out to your primary care physician or OB. This is pretty common, so I always like to reassure women that they’re not alone in feeling this way and that they don’t have to suffer through it. There are things we can do to help you,” says Dr. Ralph.

If your partner or loved one is experiencing these symptoms during her pregnancy, Dr. Ralph says listening without judgment and offering help is the best thing you can do.

Self-care is very important, especially during a pregnancy. If you are pregnant and think you may be experiencing symptoms of perinatal depression, talk to your doctor.