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The Birth of a Mother

By ALEXANDRA SACKS, M.D. MAY 8, 2017

For most women, pregnancy and new motherhood is a joy — at least some of the time. But most mothers also experience worry, disappointment, guilt, competition, frustration, and even anger and fear.

As the psychiatrist Daniel Stern explained in the 1990s in his books “The Motherhood Constellation” and “The Birth of a Mother,” giving birth to a new identity can be as demanding as giving birth to a baby.

Dr. Stern showed that becoming a mother is an identity shift, and one of the most significant physical and psychological changes a woman will ever experience.

The process of becoming a mother, which anthropologists call “matrescence,” has been largely unexplored in the medical community. Instead of focusing on the woman’s identity transition, more research is focused on how the baby turns out. But a woman’s story, in addition to how her psychology impacts her parenting, is important to examine, too. Of course, this transition is also significant for fathers and partners, but women who go through the hormonal changes of pregnancy may have a specific neurobiological experience.

When people have more insight into their emotions, they can be more in control of their behaviors. So even when the focus remains on the child, understanding the psychology of pregnant and postpartum women can help promote healthier parenting. Mothers with greater awareness of their own psychology may be more

empathetic to their children's emotions.

Knowing the challenges of matrescence will normalize and validate how new mothers may be feeling. These are the four key things to look out for:

Changing Family Dynamics: Having a baby is an act of creation.

Pregnancy is more than creating a new human, it's also creating a new family. A baby is the catalyst that will open new possibilities for more intimate connections as well as new stresses in a woman's closest relationships with her partner, siblings and friends.

In her 2012 book "The Maternal Lineage," Paola Mariotti, a psychoanalyst and fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society, says that a woman's maternal identity is founded in her mother's style, which in turn was influenced by how she was raised.

Whether a woman parents her child as her mother raised her, or adopts a different style, becoming a mother provides an opportunity for a do-over. In a way, a woman gets to re-experience her own childhood in the act of parenting, repeating what was good, and trying to improve what was not. If a woman had a difficult relationship with her mother, she may try to be the mother she wishes she'd had.

Ambivalence: The British psychotherapist Rozsika Parker wrote in "Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence" about the pull and push of wanting a child close, and also craving space (physically and emotionally) as the normal wave of motherhood. Ambivalence is a feeling that comes up in the roles and relationships a person is most invested in, because they're always a juggling act between giving and taking. Motherhood is no exception. Part of why people have a hard time dealing with ambivalence is that it's uncomfortable to feel two opposing things at the same time.

Most of the time, the experience of motherhood is not good *or* bad, it's both good *and* bad. It's important to learn how to tolerate, and even get comfortable with the discomfort of ambivalence.

Fantasy vs. Reality: The psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff, the head of the University College London Anna Freud Centre academic faculty for psychoanalytic research, explains that by the time the baby arrives, a woman has already developed feelings about her fantasy baby. As a pregnancy progresses, a woman creates a story about her make-believe child and becomes emotionally invested in that story.

A woman's fantasies of pregnancy and motherhood are informed by her observations of the experiences of her own mother and other female relatives and friends and her community and culture. They may be powerful enough that reality disappoints if it doesn't align with her vision.

Guilt, Shame and “The Good Enough Mother”: There's also the ideal mother in a woman's mind. She's always cheerful and happy, and always puts her child's needs first. She has few needs of her own. She doesn't make decisions that she regrets. Most women compare themselves to that mother, but they never measure up because she's a fantasy. Some women think that “good enough” (a phrase coined by the pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott) is not acceptable, because it sounds like settling. But striving for perfection sets women up to feel shame and guilt.

Mothers will feel guilty because they're always making challenging and sometimes impossible choices. At times they are required to put their own needs over those of their child. Most women don't talk about feeling ashamed because it's usually about something that they don't want anyone else to know. Shame is the feeling that there's something wrong with *me*. This is often the result of comparing yourself to an unrealistic, unattainable standard.

Too many women are ashamed to speak openly about their complicated experiences for fear of being judged. This type of social isolation may even trigger postpartum depression.

When women find themselves feeling lost somewhere between who they were before motherhood and who they think they should be now, many worry that

something is terribly wrong, when in fact this discomfort is absolutely common.

In the April issue of *Glamour* magazine, the model Chrissy Teigen became the latest in a series of celebrities who announced her struggle with postpartum depression. She joined Adele, Gwyneth Paltrow, Brooke Shields and other prominent women who have used their platforms to call attention to this serious condition.

Postpartum depression is an underdiagnosed and undertreated public health issue that affects 10 to 15 percent of mothers. But many other mothers may still be struggling with the transition to motherhood.

Consider the Instagram image of the pregnant and postpartum supermom: a nurturing, organized, sexy-but-modest multitasker who glows during prenatal yoga and seems unfazed by the challenges of leaking breasts, dirty laundry and sleep training. This woman is a fiction. She's an unrealistic example of perfection that makes other women feel inadequate when they pursue and can't achieve that impossible standard.

As the Yale psychiatrist Rosemary H. Balsam showed in an article in February in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, the history of psychiatrists ignoring how pregnancy impacts a woman's development can be traced back to Freud. Women are often left with a false binary: They either have postpartum depression or they should breeze through the transition to motherhood.

Knowing the causes of distress and feeling comfortable talking about them with others is critical to growing into a well-adjusted mother. It will help new mothers and those around them to acknowledge that while postpartum depression is an extreme manifestation of the transition to motherhood, even those who do not experience it are undergoing a significant transformation.

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