

# A Community Collaboration Toolkit for Pennsylvania Providers

## Treatment

### Types of Therapy

*Adapted from the University of Chicago Mental Health Project, accessed via  
[http://www.psych.uic.edu/research/perinatalmentalhealth/nhc\\_information.htm](http://www.psych.uic.edu/research/perinatalmentalhealth/nhc_information.htm)*

#### Treatments for perinatal depression and anxiety disorders

There are three types of treatment that are well established to be effective for treating depression and anxiety disorders during pregnancy and postpartum: interpersonal psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and medication. There are other treatments that look promising in early studies, but are not yet proven to be effective. There are also things that women can do for themselves that will help them recover more quickly and fully, along with professional treatment. Parenting coaching can help in situations where perinatal depression and/or anxiety have interfered with the mother-baby relationship.

#### Interpersonal psychotherapy

When a woman becomes a mother, her relationships with others may substantially change. Not only does she need to adjust to motherhood, but she may need to negotiate a new relationship with her partner, her other children, her parents, her in-laws, her boss and her co-workers. Sometimes this goes relatively smoothly. When it doesn't, and when the woman is dissatisfied with her roles and lacks enough support from others, this can be a major cause of postpartum depression.

Interpersonal psychotherapy helps a woman examine each of her key social roles and figure out what works and doesn't work for her in each of them. In therapy, she clarifies what specific types of support she needs from others. Then she learns effective ways of negotiating with others to get what she needs. Often this type of therapy includes role playing to practice the skills.

#### Cognitive-behavioral therapy

Women with peripartum depression may have certain habits of thinking and behaving that contribute to depressed moods. For example, a depressed woman may overly focus on negative interpretations of events. If her baby cries and she has difficulty soothing the baby, she may interpret that to mean she is a bad or ineffective mother. Her depression may make her feel like staying in bed all day, refusing phone calls and visitors, and not eating healthy foods. Cognitivebehavioral therapy helps a woman identify these thoughts and behaviors and develop healthpromoting thoughts and behaviors.

Certain types of cognitive-behavioral therapy are highly effective for treating perinatal anxiety disorders. A cognitive-behavioral therapist can teach a woman effective relaxation techniques, and can help her design a systematic way of gradually exposing herself to anxiety-provoking situations while using techniques to conquer the anxiety.

#### Medication

Certain types of medication are highly effective for treating clinical depression and anxiety. Any medication can have side effects, including effects on a fetus or newborn. Some antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications have been systematically studied for their effects in human pregnancies, and some have not.

When a woman has major depression or an anxiety disorder during pregnancy or postpartum, it is important to consult with a physician or advanced practice nurse who can figure out whether medication is needed, can weigh the risks of the symptoms against the risks of the medication, and is familiar

with the research about different medications during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Some women can be fully restored to health with psychotherapy alone, but some require medication (often along with psychotherapy) in order to recover. In many cases, the risks of the symptoms are worse than the risks of carefully chosen medication. Choosing the safest medication at the safest dose for different stages of pregnancy can reduce risks of the medication.

### Experimental treatments

Small studies have used innovative treatments for postpartum depression. Estrogen has helped women with depression in some small studies, but it is not yet known what the risks of estrogen use are, or how long women need to take estrogen to prevent the symptoms from coming back. Light therapy, also known as phototherapy, may help a woman restore her natural hormonal body rhythms after birth and that may reduce symptoms of depression. This is especially worth considering for women who notice that they feel much more depressed in the fall and winter, when there is less light.

Many women wonder whether herbal products would be effective and safer than prescription antidepressants. Unfortunately, there is no evidence from studies so far that any herbal product is effective for treating perinatal major depression. Some commonly used herbal remedies can interfere with fertility and can make the uterus contract, so it's not true that herbal products can be assumed to be safe just because they are "natural".