Mindfulness for Maternal Health and Reproductive Justice

Mindfulness has been a buzzword featured on almost every major morning news program in the US for the past year, particularly in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has slowed down some aspects of life, but babies did not get the memo. Across the country, mothers anticipate the birth of their children, exciting and anxious for their new journey. COVID-19 has intensified feelings of stress and anxiety in expecting parents. Many programs focus on the health and well-being of the baby, but not of the mothers themselves. Certainly, this oversight is very important, in fact, studies show that a mother’s mental health can impact the health of the child. So why don’t we focus on maternal mental health specifically? Mindfulness can be used as a restorative healing practice for new and expecting mothers; incorporating mindfulness into pregnancy and postpartum care can serve to improve maternal mental health and well-being.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be defined as a state of being conscious and aware of the present while doing things with intention. As a practice, mindfulness teaches us to be present in the moment, find joy and appreciation in everyday life, learn to be kinder to ourselves and others, and work to communicate more clearly with others to better hear and express feelings. Mindfulness practices can be taught to pregnant women in order to reduce stress and achieve higher levels of desirable psychological outcomes such as life satisfaction, effective emotion regulation, and empathy1.

Maternal Health Disparities

Unfortunately, about 700 women die due to pregnancy or delivery complications each year in the U.S. (CDC, 2018). In 2018, the CDC found that the overall maternal mortality rate is 17.4 per 100,000 live births in the U.S., yet there are significant disparities in this rate by race/ethnicity. The non-Hispanic Black maternal mortality rate is 37.1 deaths per 100,000 live births compared to non-Hispanic white (14.7), and Hispanic/Latinx (11.8) women (CDC, 2018). Disproportionate maternal mortality rates in Black women can be attributed to social determinants of health such as racism and sexism. These inequities influence psychological health, and can lead to increased stress in pregnant and postpartum women.

Case Study: A Mindfulness-Based Intervention for Pregnant African-American Women
A research study used mindfulness-based stress reduction training to lower stress and improve mental health of a group of Black women. Results found that the training improved levels of mindfulness, reduced reactive cortisol response and pregnancy-related stress following medical treatment, improved pregnancy-related experiences, and reduced depressive symptoms one month after the study ended. This work offers important evidence connecting mindfulness to positive maternal health outcomes.

Looking Forward: Mindfulness, Maternal Health, and Reproductive Justice

Evidence suggests that mindfulness training can be used to reduce pregnancy-related stress and improve maternal psychological health among pregnant women. Reproductive justice calls for addressing determinants of health, such as racism, gender issues, socioeconomic status, and lack of access to resources that can impact reproductive health. While mindfulness in itself does not solve these large-scale system issues, stress related to these issues can be reduced using this practice. For pregnant women, especially those who experience health inequities and anxieties exacerbated by COVID-19, this can be especially helpful. Black maternal health and well-being can be improved through use of restorative healing practices like mindfulness programs during pregnancy and postpartum care. Let’s remember to take care of mothers’ and their babies because: moms deserve love too!

References: