



IWS Auxiliary



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PUTTING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION IN ITS PLACE

For most women, the birth of a baby is a joyful experience, as the family welcomes a new member into its home. But for women suffering from postpartum depression, that same experience can become a crippling condition. And typically it's indicative of much more. Oftentimes, mothers suffering from PPD deal with guilt and low self esteem. Their days are dark, and the new challenges they face are seemingly insurmountable. For our patients who suffer from PPD, the problems often extend even further. Many times, they feel isolated both socially and culturally. In some instances, they don't speak English, making their circumstances that much more difficult.

Fortunately though for our patients confronting these issues, the Clinic offers a Mother/Infant Therapy Group (MITG) designed to deal with this debilitating condition. Milagros Fernandez, the Director of Child Development & Support Services, says that although this concept is relatively new to IWS (the first group began this past summer), the results have been positive and uplifting and indicate a bright future for this innovative program.

Milagros brings an impressive background to her position. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with a degree from the University of Chicago-School of Social Service Administration, and she is completing her final year in Erikson Institute's Infant Mental Health

Certificate Program. Interestingly, our Mother/Infant Therapy Groups are a significant outcome of IWS' newly formed collaboration with Erikson Institute, the prestigious graduate school in child development.

The collaboration is a win-win situation for both IWS and Erikson. The Clinic benefits from the involvement of Erikson staff members who attend each MITG session. Sinane Goulet, an Infant Mental Health Specialist, and four Erikson interns join IWS Child Development specialists each week and provide valuable input and expertise. And for Erikson, IWS offers an ideal site for both their graduate school training and intern placement. Erikson says it is expanding the pool of these specialized early childhood professionals in a low-income, community-based setting.

How the program works . . .

The program entails a 12-week module in which each session deals with a particular topic of concern. Our Child Development staff meets with mothers and infants once a week. Most of the patients have come to the attention of our Child Development & Support Services area through our medical providers. Milagros says obstetric patients receive a one-month postpartum screening assessment that is useful in identifying potential red flags that might indicate PPD.



Milagros Fernandez heads our Mother/Infant Therapy Groups designed to deal with postpartum depression.

In addition, the Child Development staff personally evaluates patients to determine if they are at risk or suffer from postpartum depression. The signs, according to Milagros, are similar to those associated with depression: sadness, frequent crying, hopelessness and malaise.

Each week, the mothers and their babies arrive in the Community Room about 9:30 a.m. and spend some time transitioning the babies to their IWS infant therapist. Then, the mothers meet as a separate group for about an hour and 45 minutes. This is followed by a 45 minute dyadic group session in which each mother and infant work with an individual therapist to enhance their



Postpartum depression . . . continued



Child Development Specialist Elsa Ruiz works with a mother and infant enrolled in the program.



The group setting is beneficial to women combating postpartum depression who often feel isolated.

relationship through the use of various activities and therapeutic techniques. The team includes our own Child Development specialists and Erikson Institute staff and interns.

A multi-faceted approach . . .

Integral to the success of this treatment modality, according to Milagros, is its multi-faceted approach to the issue of postpartum depression. Significantly, this modality addresses not only the mother/infant relationship but also concentrates upon the mother as an individual.

Maria Martinez, Child Development Specialist/Counselor, says that oftentimes the moms come from troubled backgrounds. In terms of their own childhoods, they may have been mistreated or abused by their own parents. For these mothers, the challenges presented by new motherhood are incredibly daunting. Occasionally, they will say, "How can I be a good mother to my child when I never experienced good parenting from my own mother and father?" That can be a tough question to answer, but fortunately our Child

Development team is well prepared to tackle that question and the many others that arise.

The process of examining their personal histories is instructive in and of itself. These mothers have probably never taken the time to understand their feelings or how their own backgrounds have influenced their perceptions of motherhood. The

realization that their own experiences have a profound effect on their parenting can be illuminating. Factors that may have a bearing on PPD include the mother's own familial relationships, whether with parents, spouses or extended family. Personal circumstances, such as job loss or financial difficulties, may factor in as well. Experts agree that it's critical to address those needs early on in order to ensure better outcomes.

Milagros says the program has specific topics for each week's meeting. They focus on issues like communication, self esteem, security and safety and family coping. On three occasions during the program, fathers are invited to participate. First, they are asked to attend a preliminary meeting when patients are deciding whether to enroll in the program. Then, they attend another session on communication as well as one on depression, its impact on family functioning, and coping mechanisms to address it.

The staff says they have been pleased with the dads' participation, particularly when one considers the fact that sometimes men are reluctant to share their feelings, and the subject of depression can be difficult to discuss with others. In terms of our MITG dads, their response has been overwhelmingly positive and important to their wives' progress.

Self esteem is a recurring issue in the program. Many of the women have suffered from low self esteem throughout their lives. And when they become mothers, a job for which they're untrained and often unprepared, their self esteem can plummet even further. But our staff says that as they learn how to interact with their babies, they become more comfortable in their role as parents. And when their babies respond positively, the mothers feel much more confident about their

abilities to tackle the important new job they've been given.

The Child Development staff agrees that it's essential for these women to feel competent, both as mothers and as individuals. In the best of circumstances, motherhood can be a daunting prospect. These mothers -- who are coping with depression in the midst of all the other challenges they face -- need to feel good about the job they are doing. When they do, both mother and child flourish.

Strength in numbers . . .

Obviously, the professional guidance our specialists and Erikson Institute staff offers is key to the program's success. However, also important is the group model itself. One of the most troubling aspects of postpartum depression is the isolation women experience in caring for their new babies. It's an enormous benefit for them to see other women with new babies who are grappling with the same issues. The opportunity to talk among themselves and to discuss how they are feeling and coping is another important component in the MITG's success.

Elsa Ruiz, Child Development Specialist, says they are also delighted to see the positive effects the program has upon the babies. "These women are learning not only how to cope with their own depression but how to be good mothers. They are realizing how important it is to have positive interaction with their babies." The moms learn how to talk to their infants, how to play with them, how to convey feelings of acceptance, and create moments of shared pleasure with their babies. All of these techniques go a long way to creating a positive atmosphere that benefits the entire family.

As the mothers and children reconnect at the end of each class, they engage in playtime activities with the infants. Child development experts say that play is an area the mothers may ignore. They know the basics -- how to feed and diaper their infants -- but sometimes playtime is overlooked because for most of them this was not something that they experienced in their family of origin. And that time is essential in creating a healthy mother/infant bond.

At the end of the program, the specialists interview the moms to gauge their reactions to the group and how it has affected them. They also ask participants to complete a Client Satisfaction Survey. From all indications, the Mother/Infant Therapy Groups have been well received by the patients who indicate they now look at motherhood and the challenges it presents in a whole new way.

Although surveys and analyses serve to quantify the results, our Child Development specialists say that it's incredibly gratifying to witness them firsthand as mothers begin the process of healing and come to enjoy this exciting new chapter in their lives.



The groups benefit not only the moms but also their babies who flourish with a stronger mother/infant bond.



Erikson Institute Infant Mental Health Specialist Sinane Goulet provides guidance and support to a new mother.