The Differential Effects of Stressors During Pregnancy on the Mental Health of Cohabiting Midwestern Couples

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Introduction

- Stress is a robust risk factor for depression (Howe, Levy, Caplan, 2004; Brown and Harris, 1978)
- Transition into parenthood is a period of enhanced stress (Parcells, 2010) and increased vulnerability for developing depression (Espino, Genna, De Luca, Roccella, La Grutta, 2015)
- Prevalence of maternal depression is 7%-19% (O'Hara & McCabe, 2013)

Purpose and Hypotheses

Purpose
Due to the prevalence of depression during the transition to parenthood, it is important to clarify whether pregnancy-specific stress is associated with higher levels of depression when controlling for perceived stress and socioeconomic status (i.e., annual joint income).

Hypotheses
1. Perceived stress, annual joint income, and pregnancy concerns will be associated with higher levels of depression.
2. Each form of stress will predict depressive symptoms when controlling for the influence of the others.
3. Concerns specific to pregnancy, delivery, and labor will predict general depressive symptoms associated with higher levels of depression.

Materials and Methods

Participants
- 50 couples recruited through flyers
- Eligibility: Over the age of 19, biological parents of target child, cohabiting, pregnant with only one child, English-speaking
- 88% mothers and 84% fathers were white; 10% mothers and 12% father identified as Hispanic or Latino
- 77% of couples were married; 44% were new parents
- Mean age of mothers was 28 (SD = 4.08) and fathers was 31 (SD = 4.55)
- On average, mothers were in the 27th week of pregnancy (end of 2nd trimester)

Procedures
- Couples attended a 3-hour laboratory appointment during which they completed interactive tasks, interviews, and questionnaires

Measures
- Perceived Stress Scale (Barbosa-Leiker et al., 2012)
- IDAS-II: General Depression scale (Watson et al., 2012)
- Concerns about Pregnancy Delivery, & Labor Questionnaire (Nylan, 2009)
- Annual joint income (self-reported)

All measures demonstrated adequate internal consistency (alphas > .80)

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Maternal Model</th>
<th>Paternal Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Income</td>
<td>.280***</td>
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Results

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Discussion

- Higher levels of perceived stress during pregnancy are associated with higher levels of depression in both mothers and fathers
- Annual joint income was not associated with depression for mothers or fathers
- Higher levels of pregnancy-specific stress were associated with higher levels of depression in mothers but not fathers
- Concerns about pregnancy uniquely predicted maternal depression when controlling for annual joint income and perceived stress

Implications

OBGYNs should screen for pregnancy-related concerns
- Administer a 5-minute questionnaire
- Doctor could answer questions to help alleviate concerns
- Provide resources (e.g., brochure about stress management) and/or referral to counseling if stress is elevated

For both mothers and fathers, higher levels of global perceived stress during pregnancy significantly predicted higher levels of depression. Annual joint income was not associated with depression. Concerns specific to pregnancy, delivery, and labor uniquely predicted general depression, but only for mothers.

References