

Narrative Family Therapy and the Treatment of Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders

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Abstract : For many families, pregnancy and the postpartum time are filled with both anticipation and change. For some pregnant or postpartum women, this time is marked by the onset of a mood or anxiety disorder. Experiencing a mood or anxiety disorders during this time of life differs from depression or anxiety at other times of life. Not only because of the physical changes occurring in the mother's body but also the mental and physical preparation necessary to redefine family roles, responsibilities, and develop new identities in the life transition. The presence of a mood or anxiety disorder can influence the way in which a mother defines herself and can complicate her understanding of her abilities and competencies as a mother. The complexity of experiencing a mood or anxiety disorder in the midst of these changes necessitates specific treatment interventions to match both the symptomatology and psychological adjustments. This study explores the use of narrative family therapy techniques when treating a mother who is experiencing postpartum depression. Externalization is a common technique used in narrative family therapy and can help client's separate their identity from the problems they are experiencing. This is crucial to a new mom who is in the middle of defining her identity during her transition to parenthood. The goal of this study is to examine how the use of externalization techniques help postpartum women separate their mood and anxiety symptoms from their identity as a mother. An exploratory case study design was conducted in a single setting, private practice therapy office, and explored how a narrative family therapy approach can be used to treat perinatal mood and anxiety disorders. The therapy sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Constructivism and narrative theory are used as theoretical frameworks and data from the therapy sessions, and a follow-up survey was triangulated and analyzed. During the course of the treatment, the participant reports using the new externalizing labels for her symptoms. Within one month of treatment, the participant reports that she could stop herself from thinking the harmful thoughts faster, and within three months, the harmful thoughts went away. The main themes in this study were building courage and less self-blame. This case highlights the role narrative family therapy can play in the treatment of perinatal mood and anxiety disorders and the importance of separating a women's mood from her identity as a mother. This conceptual framework was beneficial to the postpartum mother when treating perinatal mood and anxiety disorder symptoms.

Keywords : externalizing techniques, narrative family therapy, perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, postpartum depression

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