Perinatal and Postpartum Anxiety: A Detailed Study

A Review of

Anxiety in Childbearing Women: Diagnosis and Treatment
by Amy Wenzel (Scott Stuart, Col.)
$69.95

doi: 10.1037/a0024225

Reviewed by
Marios Constantinou, Maria Karekla

Postpartum depression is feared not only by women in their first pregnancy but also by “veteran” mothers who are into a new pregnancy. Yet, depression is often diagnosed in women who are still pregnant (perinatal depression). A large number of psychologists, neuroscientists, neurochemists, and psychiatrists view clinical anxiety and depression as similar disorders with quite similar symptomatology and biological etiology, whereas another group of professionals suggest that anxiety is quite often a prodromal stage of depression. Thus, it is not surprising that many perinatal or postnatal pregnancies are affected by maternal clinical anxiety and/or depression.

As Amy Wenzel reports in her book Anxiety in Childbearing Women: Diagnosis and Treatment, perinatal and postnatal clinical anxiety has not received as much attention as depression, and thus it has not been studied as much. The importance of more research in the area of peri- and postnatal maternal anxiety, however, was highlighted by Ilias (2009), who found that high levels of anxiety were predictive of low birth weight.

Similarly alarming are the findings that suggest that maternal anxiety is related to birth complications (Field et al., 2003); maternal neglect of the newborn’s needs (Ballard, Stanley, & Brockington, 1995); and even behavioral, learning, and emotional disorders in the child’s developing life (Van den Bergh & Marcoen, 2004). Also crucial to consider is the estimated 15 percent of women who are diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression during their pregnancies or in the weeks or months that follow pregnancy (Priest & Barnett, 2008), and this percentage is estimated to be much higher in underprivileged populations.

In her book, Wenzel, an authority in this particular scientific realm, takes on the responsibility to educate and update mental health professionals, who in return could educate the lay public, about the burdens of peri- and postnatal clinical anxiety. The book is appropriate for graduate students in the mental health professions; for seasoned mental health professionals; for medical professionals such as psychiatrists, obstetricians, pediatricians; and for any other physician who could be involved in maternal and child care.

As parents we were truly delighted to read this book. It is obvious that Wenzel authored this book with great care, diligence, and zeal. In the introduction and the first chapter, she differentiates between normally expected levels of anxiety (typical levels of anxiety that do not significantly affect everyday functioning) and maternal clinical anxiety (significantly impairing everyday functioning), which could be present during the pregnancy or postnatally.

Epidemiological findings are presented that show the magnitude of the problem at hand, and Wenzel examines the variables that are etiological precursors or “side effects” of clinical anxiety in childbearing women and future mothers. In the first chapter, she also discusses the effects of maternal depression on the fetus and the neonate (such as low birth weight and development) from biological, biochemical, and psychological standpoints.
A number of case studies are discussed and analyzed, allowing the reader to appreciate in depth the magnitude of the problem. These case studies are of particular help in Chapters 2 through 6, which specialize in the various forms of anxiety, such as generalized anxiety and trauma-related anxiety, that are related to maternal pre- and postnatal anxiety.

Each of these chapters is strategically organized to present the nature of the symptoms, which ones appear in each form of anxiety, prevalence statistics, and the negative impacts of each form of anxiety on the fetus, neonates, and young children. Wenzel also provides an in-depth discussion of comorbid disorders, etiological factors for each form of anxiety, and the neurobiological and socioeconomic variables that are associated with each form.

Chapter 7 builds on the findings and the biopsychosocial model, developed by Ross, Sellers, Gilbert Evans, and Romach (2004), which sketched the variables that are most important in the development of perinatal and postpartum anxiety and depression. Several genetic, neurochemical, and psychological factors appear to play a crucial role either directly or indirectly, as they are mediated by life stress in the development of anxiety. For example, the inherited diathesis for anxiety disorders and neurotransmitters involved in anxiety disorders are discussed as factors important to this model.

Chapter 8 through the book’s final chapter are under a section titled Clinical Management of Anxiety in Childbearing Women. This second section would be of particular value to clinicians in practice because it offers the nuts and bolts on how to assess and treat maternal perinatal anxiety with the help of psychotherapy or psychotropic medications. Therefore, this second section would be appreciated most by psychologists and other psychotherapists such as psychiatrists and social workers.

The necessity for mental health services has been increasing as the population naturally increases and our diagnostic abilities and assessments become more accurate. In addition, it has been suggested that life in today’s world is increasing the likelihood of psychopathology.

These greater needs for mental health services are partially being met by self-help resources (Nordgreen & Havik, 2011), which increasingly are being found to be good alternatives when seeing a mental health professional is not an option (Peterson, Mitchell, Crow, Crosby, & Wonderlich, 2009). Wenzel provides a very helpful and well-informed chapter on self-help for perinatal anxiety (Chapter 11), discussing and assessing a large number of self-help resources on the basis of the information and type of help they can offer.

The concluding chapter allows the reader to see what the future may bring in this area in terms of research and practice: for instance, new empirically supported treatments and improved methodology. As reviewers, we looked hard for weaknesses in this book, but instead with every chapter our enthusiasm for its subject matter became stronger and we have only positive comments to make.

Wenzel, in Anxiety in Childbearing Women: Diagnosis and Treatment, confirms that she deserves to be called an expert/authority in the area of perinatal and postpartum anxiety. This book belongs on the shelves of every psychologist, mental health professional, or physician who provides services to childbearing women, new mothers, and/or their neonates.

References


