



embrace

The Movement for Mothers

LEARNING COMMUNITY



MODULE
THREE

BELONGING

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03

BELONGING

When a woman is pregnant, she gets a lot of attention. As soon as her baby is born, that attention shifts from her to her new baby. Everything becomes about the new life she has brought into the world. What this means is that if she is struggling, no one may notice. And new mothers may struggle with a lot of things: their body is healing from the birth, they are overtired, they might be having difficulty breastfeeding and doubting themselves, and they could also be experiencing feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety and isolation. It is so important in the first few weeks and months after a mother has given birth to embrace her fully and look after her.

At the end of this module, you will have gained:

- Understanding that becoming a mother is a multifaceted transition that begins before birth and continues well beyond birth
- Knowing and understanding the process of matrescence
- Understanding the signs of post-partum depression

BECOMING

Birth produces two people. The first: a flailing soul, struggling to take in a new world, a new way of being as it draws breath against the unknown. The second: a baby.

- Bunmi Laditan

Over the nine months of pregnancy, babies are forming in their mother's womb. They develop arms and legs, and a beating heart. At the same time that they are getting ready to enter the world, a woman is preparing to undergo a transformation from who she was, to who she will be as a mother. Because of society's focus on pregnancy and birth – and not on what happens afterwards – many women are consumed by the pregnancy and the health of their growing babies that they don't have an opportunity to think about what this change will mean for them.

What happens in the process of becoming?

The transition that a woman undergoes when she becomes a mother is called "matrescence". It starts during pregnancy and continues as a new mother makes sense of her new role, relationships, and feelings¹. It refers to the changes in a woman's body, her mind and her emotions.

During pregnancy, a woman's whole body rearranges itself to accommodate her baby. Her organs (her liver, her stomach, her bladder) move and squeeze, her muscles loosen around her tummy and pelvis, her brain goes through changes that can last a lifetime, her hormones rise up and down, and her heart beats faster and harder to move around all that extra blood.

At around 20 weeks pregnant, a woman starts to feel her baby move and kick. She starts to wonder what it will be like to be a mother. Many women have dreamed of motherhood since they were little girls, other women might feel forced into having a baby, some mothers might have not intended to become pregnant, others may already know that they will not keep their baby once they have been born. For all of these women, pregnancy can be an emotionally difficult time.

Towards the end of her pregnancy, a woman will start preparing for the birth of her child. Maybe her friends and family have told her stories, maybe she doesn't know what to expect. The anticipation, sometimes fear, excitement, confidence or self-doubt can feel overwhelming to many women, who are also dealing with swollen feet, aches and pains, and being tired.

Suddenly, her baby is born, and a mother is expected to be a mother, no matter what her body feels like, how full her mind is, or how up and down her emotions are. She must be a mother, even if she has no idea how.

When women find themselves feeling lost somewhere between who they were before motherhood and who they think they should be now, many worry that something is terribly wrong, when in fact this discomfort is absolutely common.

- Alexandra Sacks

¹ Zimmerman, E. (2018) The Identity Transformation of Becoming a Mom, The Cut

POST-PARTUM DEPRESSION

What is post-partum depression?

As many as 4 in every 10 mothers in South Africa have a condition called “post-partum depression”. This is different to “baby blues”, which many women experience in the days after birth as their hormone levels start returning to normal. Post-partum depression starts soon after the birth of a baby and can last for months and sometimes years.

What are some of the signs of post-partum depression?

- Feeling sad, hopeless, guilty and anxious
- Thoughts that scare you, about hurting yourself or your baby
- Staying away from other people and wanting to be alone
- Struggling to bond with your baby after months
- Finding it difficult to concentrate or make decisions
- Feeling tired but not being able to sleep
- Not enjoying what you used to enjoy
- Losing interest in what happens outside of your house

What are some of the contributing factors to post-partum depression?

Post-partum depression occurs due to a number of reasons, some of them biological. However, there are some social factors that put mothers at risk of developing post-partum depression:

- Loss of close family or friends due to COVID-19
- Past trauma
- Poverty is associated with high rates of anxiety and depression
- Lack of social support, which may be made worse by the restrictions of COVID-19 lockdown
- Recovery from a traumatic pregnancy and/or birth
- Other health concerns, such as HIV status or COVID-19
- Absence of family support

It's important that we're aware of the social factors that contribute to post-partum depression, because this will help us in supporting mothers who develop it. Knowing that some mothers are falling through gaps in our social fabric will hopefully give us direction of how to mend those gaps, and address the onset of post-partum depression.

Unfortunately, the society that we live tells us that depression is something that is created by one person's mind, instead of the result of an environment that does not support or include people in their most vulnerable moments.

² Cagliostro, D. (2019) Post Partum Depression (PPD), Psycom

³ Adapted from Perinatal Mental Health Project website: <https://pmhp.za.org/resources/mmh-facts/risk-factors/>

CONNECT

Linda's story⁴:

After the birth of her first child, Linda started to feel anxious while still in hospital. Her feelings got stronger as the days and weeks went on. She didn't know it yet, but she had post-partum depression, or post-natal distress. She didn't want to see anyone, but was also afraid of being alone. She felt like she couldn't cope by herself, and would count the hours until her husband came home from work. Wanting nothing more than to feel bonded to her child, Linda was hopeless, desperate and despondent. Treatment for post-partum depression, as well as just the passing of time, helped her to regain control of her experience as a mother. She went on to write a book on post-natal distress called "When Your Blessings Don't Count", and supports mothers who are dealing with this condition.



⁴ Lewis, L. (2011) When your Blessings Don't Count, Metz Press

BELONGING TO A COMMUNITY

What is social isolation?

For the first few weeks of a baby's life, they are so dependent on their mother. It is difficult for a mother to have her "own" life during this time. She is removed from her job, her friends, and her usual routines. She can feel disconnected and alone. Even as her baby grows and becomes more independent, a mother can still feel that she has lost a part of herself. She can start to feel isolated from herself and from others, which puts her at increased risk for post-partum depression. It's so important that instead of isolation, mothers feel belonging.

Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free. - Starhawk

We've all heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a village to raise a mother. For many mothers who are struggling with becoming a mother, belonging to a community of mothers who supports them can be very empowering.

I think as mothers, we need to form support groups in our community whereby we can talk about our struggle of being a mother. Whether you're a single mother or you have your partner like who is supporting you or your family because... why? Because I'm saying that is because more especially us Xhosa people say we don't have much to sit down and talk about how we feel about being a mother. I don't see that we support each other, all we do is judge. I think we can have support groups, we can have like we can go online try to research more because, when you look at it, it seems like it's a huge thing. But when you do your research, when you talk to other mothers, when you try to share your story with other people it seems like you are so relieved. It's like the package has been like off-loaded to you. I think praying, working together as mothers, support groups intended that like could work even if you went to a clinic. There they would have sessions about how to care about your child supporting each other, we share those problems, we would solve our problems. Like sisterhood thing. I think that's for me like supporting each other.

- Thabisa, Embrace member

Belonging to a community of mothers means that

- A mother has someone to witness her journey and her growth - "I am seen."
- A mother can call on other mothers for understanding, compassion, advice and assistance - "I am supported."
- A mother is investing in her own wellbeing: - "I am important."
- A mother can connect with others who share some of the same experiences - "I am not alone."

NEXT STEPS

REFLECT



Reflect on what you have learned

What do you think a supportive community for mothers looks like and feels like?

Reflect on the statement: "I'd feel so bad because I thought 'this is what I wanted'. There's a tremendous amount of shame and guilt." (Melanie Bala)

- *What feelings do you think are "normal" for a new mom to feel?*
- *Did you ever have feelings after your child was born that you didn't understand, or didn't want to feel?*

Grab a journal and pick one or two of the following writing prompts to write about:

- *What I most proud of as a mother is...*
- *I forgive myself for...*
- *If I could write a letter to a new mom, I would say...*

SHARE



Post this image and share your thoughts

Post this image with the hashtag [#MaternalMentalHealth](#) and in your comment encourage women who have faced difficult feelings after birth to talk to their healthcare provider or a trusted friend or family member. Ask your social media followers to comment on what they did to feel better after their own pregnancy and birth.

DOWNLOAD IMAGE

ACT



Things you can do in response to what you have learned

Reach out to a new mom from work or your social circles. Check-in with her and listen to how she's feeling. You can ask her questions like:

- Are there any times of the day that you find particularly difficult?
- Have you been excited to introduce your baby to your friends and family, or would you prefer to be alone right now?
- Are you worried about anything at the moment, not just your baby but anything else?

It's important that you let her know that she is not alone and that you are there to see and support her. If she is struggling, you can offer to help her find the treatment that she needs.

Have a look at Embrace's [#TuesdayCheckIn](#) gallery and download and share inspiration with other mothers.



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The Movement for Mothers

I WANT MORE



MODULE THREE

EMBRACING BELONGING

Join the movement

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CONNECT

Fefe's story⁵:

Fefe had to start a new job when her son was only two months old. He was ill in hospital and she would sleep in a chair next to his cot, and leave for work from the hospital. She relied on her own mother and her partner to help her and her son during this time. She calls her circle of support a "treasure". She looks for every opportunity to connect with other mothers and she knows that she is not alone on her journey. She talks about how communities need to protect mothers and provide a safe environment for them to raise their children.

Fefe's story tells us a few things about becoming a mother, and feeling as though she belongs as a mother.

She could not prepare for her baby being sick, nor did she know that she would get a new job so soon after giving birth. Becoming a mother is very difficult to prepare for! Pregnant women can prepare their bodies, but it is just as important to prepare their minds and emotions.

To become the kind of mother that you want to be, psychologists suggest that pregnant women ask themselves two questions⁶:

1. What is the one thing you hoped for in your childhood that you did not receive?
2. How do you feel when others depend on you?

By thinking through the first question, new mothers will have a vision and a goal in mind to motivate them when they go through a rough patch. Knowing the kind of mother that they want to be is the first step to becoming that mother.

By thinking through the second question, new mothers can start to think about how they can still look after themselves while their baby needs them. New mothers can also think about who they might need to depend on so that they feel supported, and what they need to feel as though they belong to this new life of motherhood.

⁵ Accessed at: <https://www.embrace.org.za/on-being-mothered-and-mothering-fefes-story/>

⁶ Fraga, J. (2014) How to Emotionally Prepare for Motherhood, Psychology Today

For me it's that like mothers can support each other, which means they can meet, like find that space of their own mothers and come together and talk about what each mother needs and what each mother - where she feels like she doesn't get enough of how can we come together and support each other... Help the child grow, and what we know and what we don't know. And when we come together as mothers, we'll find that easier because maybe some other mother will tell you that 'I can't find when to put my child to sleep' and you can give an advice to that mother, like, how to do it. And when the mother becomes so depressed and so tired, when it comes to that, when a child is crying, you will become more anxious and more sad, then you feel like you want to give up. But if we had that support as mothers, it will be, like, easier way to find how to let the child so... And if the government will come with a solution where, like, a plan on how to support the mothers because they are some mothers that are first time mothers, they are young, they don't know how to cope, to be a parent. So it will be easy for government can come up with a plan of action in that for mothers. It will be a great thing for us mothers; it will be an easy way to be a mother. And we'll be just grateful and it will come with joy at the end because you will now have, you know, you can, I can rely on this one, I can rely on that one. Even in the community - also the community - can be helpful in terms of, like here, in Redhill, there is no support to each other. We don't have support, till the women from Embrace came to... Now we know we can go where, you know, like if I couldn't cope we know what to do, but we still have the little information with us, we need that support.

- Patricia, Embrace member



NEXT STEPS

REFLECT



Reflect on what you have learned

*Are you part of a community of mothers who support you on your motherhood journey?
Who are the people in your life that you can turn to when motherhood feels difficult, and you feel overwhelmed?
Can you think of any mothers that you know who seem a little bit isolated or alone? How can you reach out to them?*

SHARE



Post this image and share your thoughts

Post this image with the hashtag #NoMotherLeftBehind and in your comment write a commitment to the mothers that you know. Tag them and tell them you are there for them and that they are not alone. Encourage others to comment and tag moms that need to know they're part of a broader community of people who care.

DOWNLOAD IMAGE

ACT



Things you can do in response to what you have learned

Post-partum depression is a medical condition. It is not something that a mother is "putting on" and not something that she can "just get over". It is also not a sign of being a failure of a mother. Mothers who think they have post-partum depression can access treatment at their local healthcare facility. They might need a friend or family member to come with to campaign for proper treatment, so that they are not turned away by a healthcare worker who says that these feelings are "normal" or that they will pass.

Visit your local healthcare facility and find out what support they offer mothers who are suffering from post-partum depression. Ask about the treatment options for mothers, and how they can go about accessing that treatment.

Send us an email (learn@embrace.org.za) or a WhatsApp (066 320 4477) to let us know what you learnt and we will add the facility to our resource guide for new mothers.

Additionally, you can also prepare a shareable list of local resources and share with the moms in your networks.

GIVING BIRTH DURING COVID-19

COVID-19 has put our healthcare facilities under enormous pressure. Many are dealing with higher patient numbers than usual. Some may be understaffed because staff have contracted the virus and are on sick leave. Because of this, clinics and hospitals are operating under rules and regulations that are outside of their 'business as usual'.

This may have several implications for moms giving birth:

- Mothers may not be able to have a birth companion with them when they give birth and are recovering
- Fathers may not be able to visit the mother and baby while they are in hospital
- Provided there are no complications, mothers may be discharged earlier than usual from hospitals

All of this makes a very delicate time more stressful, so it is important that pregnant moms are supported emotionally and in other ways to make it easier when the time to give birth comes.

Messages for Mothers suggests a few ways in which you can assist:

- Acknowledge the pregnant mother's feelings and fears. It is possible to understand the reason for the rules and to still be upset or even angry about what they mean for a person's birth experience. Acknowledge these feelings as real, and listen if a pregnant mother needs to talk to you.
- Help a pregnant mom prepare for birth in the following ways:
 - Buy her data and airtime on so she can keep in contact with loved ones while she's in the hospital.
 - Help her download calming music on her phone to listen to when she is in labour (don't forget to get her earphones).
 - Create a WhatsApp group to alert family when she's in labour, or to tell them when she's given birth.
- Share [this infographic](#) from Messages for Mothers which was created specifically for moms who may have to give birth without family nearby.