

Exploring the Spectrum of Joy: Determinants of Emotional Well-being in the Postpartum Period

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ABSTRACT: The postpartum period is a critical phase in a mother's life that is often overlooked in discussions about mental well-being. This research, conducted in the Lucknow District of Uttar Pradesh, India, aimed to understand the emotional spectrum experienced by women during this transformative period. The study involved 100 postpartum women within 5 to 6 months of childbirth, selected using purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation. Semi-structured interviews provided in-depth insights into their experiences, with data analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal a broad spectrum of emotions experienced by new mothers, including joy, anxiety, and stress. Emotional intensity is notably high during the first three months postpartum due to hormonal fluctuations, physical recovery, and the adjustment to new caregiving responsibilities. By the sixth month, emotional stability generally improves as hormonal levels normalize, routines become more predictable, and support systems become more effective. The study underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches that integrate traditional practices with modern postpartum care. Effective support networks and self-care practices are essential for enhancing maternal well-being. By fostering empathy, balancing traditional expectations with individual needs, and providing robust support, it is possible to improve outcomes for new mothers and their infants during this crucial period.

INTRODUCTION

Bringing a new life into the world is an incredible and transformative experience, but it can also significantly impact your mental health. While pregnancy and childbirth are often celebrated, the postpartum period is frequently overlooked in discussions about mental well-being. This vital phase, known as postpartum or postnatal, can be an emotional rollercoaster filled with physical changes and new responsibilities. The significance of this period cannot be overstated, as it encompasses a time when new mothers are adjusting to their new roles, coping with physical recovery from childbirth, and dealing with the realities of infant care.

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Motherhood is a transformative journey that brings joy, challenges, and profound changes to a woman's life. Amid the joyous moments and new beginnings, it is essential to acknowledge the less-discussed aspects of motherhood, particularly those related to mental health (Modak *et al.*, 2023). The postpartum period, while often filled with happiness and excitement, can also be a time of vulnerability and emotional upheaval. This research seeks to explore the multifaceted spectrum of emotions experienced by women during this transformative period and to identify the factors that influence their emotional well-being (Ravaldi *et al.*, 2023).

In the journey to motherhood, a woman undergoes significant changes, periods of instability, and a reorganization of her life. This psychological New Series ©SERIALS 127

transformation is influenced by various factors, including her personal condition, outlooks and beliefs, social and economic status, preparedness, knowledge of the situation, and psychological health. The more developed these aspects are, the more effectively she can embrace her maternal role (Hwang *et al.*, 2022). However, the transition is not always smooth, and many women may struggle with feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression.

Through qualitative interviews with postpartum women, this study seeks to understand the spectrum of joy and challenges faced by new mothers, offering insights into support mechanisms that can enhance their emotional well-being. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal experiences of these women, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the postpartum period. The findings from these interviews can shed light on the common challenges faced by new mothers, such as sleep deprivation, changes in body image, and the pressure to meet societal expectations of motherhood.

Additionally, this research aims to identify the various support systems that can play a crucial role in supporting the emotional wellbeing of new mothers. Family support, professional counseling, peer support groups, and access to accurate information about postpartum health are all critical components that can help new mothers navigate this challenging period. By understanding the factors that influence emotional well-being in the postpartum period, healthcare providers, policymakers, and support networks can develop more effective strategies to support new mothers.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the emotional well-being of postpartum women in a semi-urban area of Mohanlalganj of Lucknow district, Uttar Pradesh, India. The qualitative approach was particularly suited to this research as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the personal experiences and perceptions of participants. This methodology enabled the collection of rich, detailed data that might be overlooked by quantitative methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of the postpartum experience.

The research was conducted in a semi-urban area characterized by a unique socio-cultural and economic landscape that blends traditional cultural practices with modern influences. This setting was integral to understanding the diverse experiences of postpartum women, capturing the intersection of traditional beliefs, family dynamics, and socio-economic realities. The study focused on postpartum women within 5 to 6 months of giving birth, a crucial period when new mothers are adjusting to their roles and routines. This timeframe was chosen because it extends beyond the immediate postpartum recovery phase, a period when initial support often begins to wane, leaving mothers to navigate the ongoing challenges of motherhood. This phase was considered ideal for exploring their emotional well-being and understanding the specific challenges they encounter during this transitional period.

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants, a strategy well-suited to qualitative research. This approach allowed for the intentional selection of individuals with specific characteristics relevant to the research questions. In this study, 100 participants from the Hindu community were selected based on their postpartum status (within 5 to 6 months of childbirth) and their willingness to share their experiences. This method ensured that the study captured a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, reflecting the diversity of emotional well-being among postpartum women in this particular community.

The primary aim of the research was to provide insights into how cultural practices, family structures, and socio-economic factors influence the emotional well-being of postpartum women, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of maternal health in semi-urban settings in India. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, following verbal consent from the participants. This data collection method provided a flexible yet focused approach to gathering in-depth information. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' emotional experiences, challenges faced, and coping mechanisms during the postpartum period. Topics covered in the interviews included physical recovery, emotional changes, support systems, and societal

expectations. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a private, comfortable setting to ensure participants felt safe and free to express themselves. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

By focusing on these detailed narratives, the study sought to illuminate the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors that shape postpartum emotional well-being, aiming to contribute valuable insights to the field of maternal health within the discipline of anthropology.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the interviews. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data through a series of steps. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting initial ideas. Next, the data was systematically coded to identify significant features relevant to the research questions, with codes applied to segments of data that appeared interesting and meaningful. These codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Once the themes were clearly defined and named, capturing the essence of each theme, the final step involved writing up the themes in a coherent and logical manner, supported by direct quotes from the interviews to illustrate key points.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic Characteristics

The study population predominantly consisted of women aged between 18 and 30 years, comprising 84.5% of the participants, with the remaining 15.5% aged between 30 and 40 years. In terms of educational attainment, 25% of the women had not received any formal education, 40% had completed up to the 10th grade, 20% had passed the 12th grade, and 15% held a graduation degree. Regarding employment status, 12% of the women were engaged in agricultural labor, 15% were self-employed in activities such as running boutiques and beauty salons, 20% were employed in either the public or private sector, and the remaining

63% were homemakers, responsible for managing household affairs and family care duties. Antenatal care varied among the participants: 35.5% of the women had all antenatal checkups during the nine-month period, 48% had only two ultrasounds and some antenatal checkups, while 16.5% did not attend any antenatal checkups and had only one ultrasound before delivery. Delivery details indicated that 82% of the women had full-term deliveries, while 12% had preterm deliveries. A majority (93.2%) had vaginal deliveries, with the rest having cesarean deliveries. All participants identified as Hindus, with 64% belonging to the general category, 32% to the other backward class (OBC), and the remainder to the scheduled castes (SC).

Emotional Changes

The research revealed that postpartum women encounter a broad spectrum of emotions, frequently marked by a combination of joy and fulfillment alongside anxiety and stress. The transition to parenthood during this period is inherently emotional. Approximately 60% of participants reported experiencing significant levels of anxiety, while 40% exhibited symptoms of depression. These findings underscore the considerable emotional challenges faced by many new mothers during the postpartum period. As one participant shared,

“There are days when I feel immense joy just looking at my baby, but other days I feel overwhelmed and anxious about everything”

The emotional intensity experienced by postpartum women is particularly pronounced during the first three months after childbirth, a period characterized by a broad spectrum of feelings, including profound joy, anxiety, exhaustion, and at times, emotional distress. This heightened emotional state is significantly influenced by rapid hormonal changes as the body transitions from high levels of pregnancy hormones like estrogen and progesterone to their lower post-pregnancy levels. These hormonal fluctuations can lead to mood swings, irritability, and heightened sensitivity. Concurrently, women undergo physical recovery from childbirth, which involves managing pain, fatigue, and the physical demands of caring for a newborn. This recovery process can be

physically draining and emotionally taxing, as new mothers adapt to the continuous demands of infant care, including frequent feedings, diaper changes, and the unpredictable nature of a newborn's needs. The combination of these factors often results in sleep deprivation, increased stress, and emotional strain.

The adjustment to new motherhood also involves grappling with significant changes in personal identity and daily routines. Many women face challenges in breastfeeding, bonding with their baby, and finding a new balance in their lives. Additionally, complications during childbirth or preterm delivery further amplify feelings of distress and anxiety. As one participant described,

“At times, I feel like crying and go somewhere where I am alone and enjoy me time because I am tired of caring for the baby and looking after her all the time”,

reflecting the deep emotional exhaustion and need for personal space that many new mothers experience.

By the sixth month postpartum, there is often a gradual stabilization of emotions. This improvement is due to several factors: hormonal levels begin to normalize, leading to a reduction in mood swings; more predictable routines with the baby are established, which helps manage the demands of infant care more effectively; ongoing physical recovery from childbirth contributes to improved energy levels and reduced discomfort; and increased support from family, friends, and healthcare providers provides practical help and emotional encouragement. Together, these factors contribute to a more balanced emotional state and overall improved wellbeing, allowing many women to adjust more comfortably to their new roles and responsibilities.

A critical factor influencing the emotional wellbeing of postpartum women is the experience of preterm delivery and complications during childbirth. The study revealed that approximately 78% of the women reported traumatic experiences during labor, including intense pain and unexpected medical interventions. Such traumatic experiences can have a profound and lasting impact on a mother's emotional health, often leading to increased stress, anxiety, and a heightened risk of developing postpartum depression. Notably, mothers aged between 18 and

25 often attributed their suffering during childbirth to their newborns. One participant shared,

“It took me 2 to 3 months to develop love and attachment for my baby boy. Initially, I struggled to bond with him, as I attributed my suffering during childbirth to him”

The Role of Social Support Systems in Postpartum Well-Being

The findings of the research indicate that social support systems play a critical role in influencing the emotional well-being of postpartum women, with both positive and negative impacts identified.

Positive Impacts of Social Support

The research findings highlight the critical impact of social support systems on the emotional well-being of postpartum women. The study revealed that women who received robust support from their spouses, extended family, and community resources reported significantly better emotional health outcomes. Approximately 78% of the participants emphasized that having help with childcare and household tasks was instrumental in reducing stress and enhancing their overall well-being. This support was particularly valuable in mitigating feelings of isolation, a common challenge in the postpartum period.

The importance of emotional support from spouses was frequently noted, with one participant expressing,

“My husband has been a great help. He takes care of the baby when I need a break, which has been a lifesaver”

This level of involvement not only alleviates physical burdens but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and emotional closeness, which is crucial for maternal mental health. The presence of a supportive partner or family member provides reassurance and practical assistance, enabling new mothers to navigate the challenges of parenthood with greater confidence. The findings also underscore the role of extended family and community resources in supporting postpartum women. These networks offer additional layers of support, from practical help to emotional guidance. One participant highlighted the significance of having a supportive social circle,

stating,

“Having someone to talk to made me feel less alone and more confident in my parenting”

This sense of connectedness and belonging is essential for coping with the emotional and psychological demands of new motherhood.

Challenges and Negative Aspects of Social Support

A critical finding is that a lack of understanding or empathy from those in the support network can lead to significant emotional challenges for postpartum women. For instance, when family members or partners fail to empathize with the new mother’s experiences, it can result in feelings of frustration and isolation. This lack of emotional attunement may leave mothers feeling misunderstood and unsupported, exacerbating feelings of loneliness.

Unsolicited advice and unrealistic expectations from family members or friends can also have detrimental effects. While well-intentioned, such advice can often come across as intrusive or critical, leading mothers to feel overwhelmed or inadequate. This is particularly problematic when the advice conflicts with the mother’s own instincts or the guidance of healthcare professionals, creating confusion and self-doubt. The pressure to meet unrealistic expectations can intensify stress levels and contribute to a sense of failure if mothers feel they are not living up to these ideals.

Moreover, judgment and criticism from the family members and relatives can significantly undermine a mother’s confidence. Negative comments about parenting choices or criticisms about the baby’s behavior can significantly increase anxiety and self-doubt. This kind of criticism can be particularly damaging, as it undermines a mother’s confidence and adds to the already challenging postpartum period. This critical atmosphere may contribute to a cycle of guilt and depression, as mothers feel they are not performing their roles adequately. One significant finding from the research is that those who receive low social support during and after pregnancy are at risk of higher rates of substance use and developing mental illness. This highlights the potential

for inadequate or negative support to exacerbate mental health issues, including the risk of substance use as a coping mechanism.

The societal pressure to conform to idealized norms of motherhood further complicates these dynamics. Many mothers face intense scrutiny over their parenting choices and are expected to adhere to certain standards, such as breastfeeding, maintaining a perfect home, or quickly returning to pre-pregnancy bodies. One participant shared a personal experience, saying,

“Initially, I wasn’t able to breastfeed my baby, so I had to use formula milk. My mother-in-law used to scold and criticize me, and I felt like I was failing my baby. It made me question whether I could be a good mother, as everyone around me seemed to either advise or criticize me”

When mothers feel they fall short of these societal expectations, it can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy, further exacerbating emotional distress.

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND RITUALS IN POSTPARTUM PERIOD

The Tradition of ‘Saur’ and its Implications

The research findings highlight the significant role that various rituals and traditional practices play in helping women manage postpartum stress. In particular, the traditional confinement period known as *Saur* emerges as a key strategy for emotional well-being during the postpartum period. This practice, commonly observed in South Asian cultures, involves encouraging new mothers to rest and recuperate for around 30 to 40 days after childbirth. During this time, mothers receive support from family members, which not only aids in their physical recovery but also indirectly supports their emotional stability. By minimizing external demands and responsibilities, *Saur* helps reduce stress, enabling mothers to focus on recuperation and bonding with their baby. The confinement period often includes increased familial support, with family members taking on household responsibilities and childcare, thereby enhancing the emotional support network for the new mother. Adhering to cultural and traditional practices during

confinement offers psychological comfort and reassurance, aligning with familiar norms. Additionally, *Saur* facilitates a focused adjustment to parenthood and may involve in-home healthcare or traditional monitoring, ensuring early detection of postpartum issues. This structured downtime is crucial for healing, as it reduces physical strain and helps mothers regain strength. By prioritizing rest, mothers can focus on their emotional health, reducing the risk of postpartum depression and anxiety. The confinement period encourages mothers to spend quality time with their newborns, fostering attachment and bonding. This focus on nurturing the mother-infant relationship is essential for emotional well-being, as strong bonds can enhance maternal confidence and satisfaction. Positive interactions with the baby can also release oxytocin, further promoting feelings of happiness and reducing stress.

However, the practice of ‘*Sau*’r also presents potential negative impacts. The confinement period often led to social isolation, as new mothers are restricted from leaving their homes or interacting with people outside their immediate family.

“I found myself in a small room, with all the household duties placed upon my mother-in-law. During that period, I felt quite vulnerable and isolated. I shed many tears, and I’ll always remember the challenges I faced”

-statement by a first-time mother who had caesarean delivery.

This isolation can negatively impact emotional well-being. Additionally, there can be significant pressure to adhere to traditional practices, which may cause stress if the mother’s personal preferences or modern lifestyles are not aligned with these practices. Some traditional practices may conflict with modern healthcare advice, potentially causing confusion or stress for new mothers trying to navigate different recommendations as shared by the one of women,

“The pressure to follow every traditional practice was overwhelming. There were moments when I wanted to do things differently but felt compelled to adhere to customs to avoid criticism”

The reliance on family members for support during the confinement period can be problematic if

such support is unavailable or if family dynamics are strained, leading to increased stress and emotional burden on the new mother.

The ‘Chatti’ Ceremony: Celebrating Motherhood and its Challenges

The research findings also underscore the significant impact of the *Chatti* ceremony on the emotional well-being of postpartum women. This traditional celebration, held on the sixth day after childbirth, marks a crucial milestone in a new mother’s journey, symbolizing her transition into motherhood. By acknowledging and honoring this transition, the *Chatti* ceremony bolsters the mother’s sense of identity and self-worth, providing essential emotional validation and support during a time of profound change. As one working woman reflected,

“As the ceremony began and I held my baby, I felt a profound shift within me. It gave me confidence and assurance that I would care for my baby to the best of my ability. I prayed to God for guidance and support in becoming the best mother I could be”

Participating in rituals and traditions following childbirth provides significant psychological comfort to new mothers. Engaging in cultural practices helps mothers feel anchored in their heritage and reinforces their role as caregivers. This connection to cultural traditions fosters a sense of stability and reassurance during a period of significant change. Additionally, these practices facilitate emotional expression by allowing mothers to share their experiences and feelings with family and friends. Such open communication supports emotional processing, thereby reducing the risk of developing postpartum depression and anxiety.

Conversely, the study finds that the ‘*Chatti*’ ceremony can create additional emotional pressure on new mothers. This traditional celebration, held to honor the newborn and mother, often leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. New mothers are expected to be presentable and engage with numerous guests just days after giving birth, which can be physically taxing and emotionally draining. One mother shared,

“Instead of resting and recuperating, I had to participate in the Chatti rituals and

entertain guests. I had to sit for long durations, which frustrated me as no one understood I had stitches in my lower body”

This expectation to participate in social activities soon after childbirth can hinder proper rest and recovery, contributing to increased stress and frustration.

The study reveals both positive and negative impacts of participating in postpartum rituals and ceremonies on the emotional well-being of new mothers. On the positive side, these traditions can provide a sense of community and support. For instance, one mother stated,

“The rituals made me feel cherished and supported by my family. It was comforting to have everyone around, helping and celebrating the new addition to our family”

Such ceremonies can reinforce cultural identity and offer emotional reassurance, creating a sense of belonging and shared joy. Engaging in cultural practices helps mothers feel anchored in their heritage and reinforces their role as caregivers. This connection to cultural traditions fosters a sense of stability and reassurance during a period of significant change.

Participating in rituals and traditions following childbirth provides significant psychological comfort to new mothers. These practices facilitate emotional expression by allowing mothers to share their experiences and feelings with family and friends. Such open communication supports emotional processing, thereby reducing the risk of developing postpartum depression and anxiety.

However, more than 45% of women reported that participating in these rituals and ceremonies creates additional emotional pressure. The need to meet certain expectations and engage in social activities before they are ready can be stressful. One mother shared,

“While the Chatti ceremony was beautiful, I felt overwhelmed by the number of guests and the expectations placed on me to perform certain rituals. I was still recovering and just wanted some quiet time with my baby”

ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING POSTPARTUM STRESS

Building Effective Support Networks

Strong support networks are vital for new mothers navigating postpartum stress. About 78% of women reported that having a robust support system—comprising spouses, extended family, and friends—significantly eased their burden. Key findings include:

Spousal Support: Women who received active involvement from their husbands in childcare and household duties experienced reduced stress and anxiety. Many appreciated their partners’ help during nighttime feeds and daily tasks, which provided essential rest and emotional relief.

Extended Family: The involvement of parents and in-laws in daily chores and childcare also played a crucial role. However, conflicting opinions and pressure to adhere to traditional practices sometimes added stress, highlighting the need for a balance between family input and maternal autonomy.

Self-Care Practices and Mental Health

Self-care practices emerged as another crucial adaptive strategy for managing postpartum stress among women in Lucknow. The research findings indicate that women who actively engaged in self-care practices reported better mental health outcomes and a more positive postpartum experience.

One of the key self-care practices identified was prioritizing rest and sleep. Many new mothers emphasized the importance of rest in their recovery process, with some highlighting the role of family support in allowing them to sleep or take breaks. Women who could rest adequately were less likely to experience severe fatigue or emotional burnout, which are common during the postpartum period.

Another important aspect of self-care was engaging in activities that provided mental and emotional relief. For example, some women mentioned practicing yoga, meditation, or prayer as ways to relax and manage stress. One of the participants shared,

“I used to dance, but due to the stitches, I couldn’t continue. Instead, I considered joining a yoga class for some relief and a chance to get out of the house for a while”

These activities were particularly valued in the context of Lucknow's cultural and religious practices, where such forms of self-care are often integrated into daily life. The calming effects of these practices helped women manage feelings of anxiety and promoted a sense of peace and well-being.

The research also found that staying connected with friends and maintaining a social life, albeit in a limited capacity, was beneficial for mental health. New mothers who maintained social connections reported feeling less isolated and more supported. These interactions provided a break from the routine of childcare and offered an opportunity to share experiences and receive emotional support from peers.

However, the study also highlighted barriers to self-care, including societal expectations and the lack of time. Many women felt pressured to prioritize the needs of their baby and family over their own, often neglecting their own well-being. The cultural expectation that mothers should be self-sacrificing can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt when they take time for themselves. This underscores the need for greater awareness and support for self-care practices, emphasizing that a mother's well-being is crucial for the well-being of her child and family.

CONCLUSION

The research article concludes by emphasizing the multifaceted nature of the postpartum experience, which is characterized by both joy and significant challenges. The findings reveal that emotional wellbeing during this critical period is influenced by various determinants, including social support, emotional changes, cultural practices, and adaptive strategies.

Social support emerges as a pivotal factor in enhancing the emotional health of new mothers. While it can provide essential emotional and practical assistance, the study highlights that poorly delivered support can lead to stress and negative feelings. This study calls for a nuanced approach to supporting new mothers, emphasizing empathy, realistic expectations, and non-judgmental support. Creating an environment where mothers feel valued and supported in their unique experiences and choices is vital to mitigating potential negative impacts and promoting better emotional outcomes.

Cultural practices and beliefs also play a crucial role in shaping the postpartum experience. They can offer emotional support and foster a sense of belonging, yet they may also impose pressures that affect a mother's autonomy and contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Balancing these cultural expectations with individual needs is vital for optimizing emotional wellbeing.

The research underscores the importance of creating effective support networks and engaging in self-care practices as key strategies for managing postpartum stress. Adopting culturally sensitive approaches that respect traditional practices while integrating modern, evidence-based postpartum care is crucial for supporting new mothers. This comprehensive understanding of the determinants of emotional well-being is essential for fostering positive outcomes during the postpartum period, benefiting both mothers and infants.

The findings highlight the necessity of an empathetic and supportive social network to enhance the emotional health of new mothers. Increased awareness and education are needed to ensure that social support is both constructive and empathetic, balancing traditional practices with individual needs and contemporary medical advice. Traditional ceremonies, while important, may sometimes limit the mother's autonomy and decision-making power, leading to frustration and resentment, and may set unrealistic expectations of motherhood, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and emotional distress.

Overall, the research conducted in the Lucknow District emphasizes the critical need for building effective support networks and promoting self-care practices. Integrating culturally sensitive approaches with modern postpartum care strategies will better support new mothers, enhancing overall well-being during this crucial period.

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