

Breastfeeding and Mental Health

Joint Statement from WABA & LLLI in celebration of World Health Day

7 April 2017

Anyone can suffer from depression, including mothers and their children. A mother suffering from depression will find it more challenging to care for her child². Just the physical demands of motherhood can be exhausting, and this only adds to the impact of depression. Depression can be treated with proper therapy, however, the end goal should be the prevention of depression through long-term promotion of mental health. This year, World Health Day focuses on the theme of “Depression: Let’s Talk.” According to the World Health Organization (WHO)¹: depression is a common mental disorder that affects people of all ages, from all walks of life, in all countries. Depression causes mental anguish and can impact on people’s ability to carry out even the simplest everyday tasks, with sometimes devastating consequences for relationships with family and friends. The risk of becoming depressed is increased by poverty, unemployment, life events such as the death of a loved one or a relationship break-up, physical illness and problems caused by alcohol and drug use. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)³ build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and cover a range of issues including ecology, economy, and equity. The SDGs promote physical and psychological wellbeing for all, and breastfeeding significantly contributes to this.

Linking breastfeeding to Mental Health

For Mothers



After childbirth, approximately 40–80% of new mothers experience mild and transient mood disturbance, while 13–19% develop postpartum depression when symptoms last over 2 weeks. Major symptoms of postpartum depression include anxiety, guilt, hopelessness, irritability, low energy, and loss of concentration. It was recently proposed that breastfeeding can protect mothers from postpartum depression.⁴

Breastfeeding mothers are at lower risk of depression than formula-feeding mothers. Mothers who are depressed benefit from the act of breastfeeding as well. Factors that may be at work in this lowered risk include:

The hormones of lactation

- The hormone oxytocin that is released during breastfeeding has a natural calming effect on the mother, and offers some protection against stress.^{4,5}
- The hormone prolactin, responsible for milk production, also seems to protect mothers against depression. One study showed decreased prolactin levels are accurate predictors of depression.⁵
- Both of these hormones act to reduce the body’s inflammatory response associated with depression.⁵

Sleep

- Studies have shown that breastfeeding mothers actually get more sleep than mothers who formula-feed or combine the two. They sleep longer and generally feel better.^{6,7,8}

For Children

The child who is breastfed benefits from frequent contact with its mother. Her care and attention to the baby at her breast is reflected in that baby's lifelong mental health. One study showed that the effect of breastfeeding for one year was associated with better mental health through age 14.⁹ As is often seen in long-term studies of breastfeeding, it is dose-dependent. The longer a child breastfeeds, the greater the positive effect.

This positive effect is rooted in the security brought about by good maternal-infant attachment. If mothers consistently respond to their baby's needs by offering the breast, a strong attachment can result. It is that early attachment relationship that helps prepare for later life stresses.

Researchers looked at the brain wave patterns of babies as a measure of depression. They found that infants who were breastfed by depressed mothers still had normal brain wave patterns. On the other hand, formula-fed infants showed abnormal waves associated with depression. Breastfeeding mothers naturally interact more with their babies— by looking at them and touching them¹⁰ – a response which provides security for those babies.

Supporting Breastfeeding Mothers: A Key to Success



Women's social networks have a major impact on their health-related decisions. Women are often drawn to other women with whom they share life experiences, especially when those experiences relate to parenting. When new mothers have someone who can understand and identify with their experiences, they can better enjoy and cope with motherhood. Peer support can fulfill this role, and can become a lifeline for mothers with breastfeeding questions and issues. Helping mothers learn what makes breastfeeding work, what signs may indicate a problem early on, and where to get help when needed may help ward off depression. Creating a culture in which breastfeeding is the norm provides role models for new mothers as they begin their parenting journey.

Mother support groups, including La Leche League International, provide role models and accurate information for both normal breastfeeding as well as problem-solving. The sharing and friendships that develop between breastfeeding mothers can also provide a safe haven of support.

Some mothers and their children do get depressed, that is an undeniable fact. However, breastfeeding can provide at least some protection from depression, in addition to its many other benefits.

In short, breastfeeding can make the world a happier and healthier place, one mother and baby at a time. Let us build a “warm chain of support” for every mother and her baby to promote mental health and help ensure a rewarding breastfeeding experience.

[#WABA](#) [#LLLI](#) [#breastfeeding](#) [#Depression](#) [#LetsTalk](#) [#mentalhealth](#)

For more information, please contact:

Key Writer: [Melissa Clark Vickers](#) WABA Secretariat: [Chuah Pei Ching](#)
LLL Leader Health & Information Coordinator

References:

1. <http://www.who.int/campaigns/world-health-day/2017/campaign-essentials/en/>
2. [Neuroscience Shows Breastfeeding is Not Just Milk. KA Kendall-Tackett. 2017](#)
3. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
4. Oxytocin Mediates a Calming Effect on Postpartum Mood in Primiparous Mothers. Risa Niwayama, Shota Nishitani, Tsunehiko Takamura, et al. *Breastfeeding Medicine*. 2017; 12(2): 103-109.
5. Can Hormones in Breastfeeding Protect Against Postnatal Depression? Fiona Donaldson-Myles. *British Journal of Midwifery*. February 2012; 20 (2): 88-93.
6. Lactation is Associated with an Increase in Slow-Wave Sleep in Women. DM Blyton, CE Sullivan, N Edwards. *Journal of Sleep Research*. 2002; 11(4): 297-303.
7. Breastfeeding Increases Sleep Duration of New Parents. T Doan, A Gardiner, CL Gay, and KA Lee. *Journal of Perinatal & Neonatal Nursing*. 2007; 21(3): 200-206.
8. The Effect of Feeding Method on Sleep Duration, Maternal Well-being, and Postpartum Depression. KA Kendall-Tackett, Z Cong, and TW Hale. *Clinical Lactation*. 2011; 2(2): 22-26.
9. The Long-term Effects of Breastfeeding on Child and Adolescent Mental Health: A Pregnancy Cohort Study Followed for 14 Years. WH Oddy, GE Kendall, J Li, et al. *Journal of Pediatrics*. 2009; 156(4): 568-574.
10. Patterns of Brain Electrical Activity in Infants of Depressed Mothers who Breastfeed and Bottle Feed: The Mediating Role of Infant Temperament. *Biological Psychology*. 2004; 67: 103-124