

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MOTHER'S SELF-CARE TO HER WELLNESS AND THE OBSTACLES ON THE WAY

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***Abstract:** The entrance into motherhood is characterized as a period filled with compassion and love for the newborn and at the same time filled with challenges that intensify in the light of the 21st century. The mother accepts the comprehensive responsibility for the care of the child, but not for the care of herself. There are various barriers that prevent the mother from giving significant space to the care of herself, and this has a price that the mother and the child pay. The mother's self-care is required and necessary for the mother's mental wellness and her parental functioning, but it is not a subject of high awareness among mothers in particular and among society in general. It is necessary to advance significant processes on this topic for the change of awareness in society in general and the change of the perception among mothers in particular while making accessible applicable tools and support for the mother.*

***Keywords:** motherhood, wellness, self-care, obstacles*

Influence of the Mother's Self-Care on Her Wellness

Motherhood is the parenting experience of women that commences with the infant's birth and continues throughout the infant's entire life. Motherhood is pure, soft, and compassionate, but this is also a situation that entails many challenges for the mother. In this period, the mother's responsibility includes the best care of the child, but no less the mother bears a responsibility towards herself, which is not always accorded equal importance in the system of references with the transition to motherhood (Barkin & Wisner, 2013).

One of the research studies that examined self-care skill among women defined the mother's self-care as the mother's ability and willingness to provide physical and emotional care for herself. This is every activity that the mother does in order to see to her physical health and mental wellness – proper nutrition and physical health, taking care of hygiene and physical appearance, allocating time for the self, getting enough sleep, willingness to delegate authority, ability to set boundaries and so on. This definition includes the emotional mental aspect that many reviews carried out in the field do not measure (Barkin & Wisner, 2013).

Lambermon, Vandenbussche, Fedding, and Van Duijnhoven (2020) classified the mother's needs into three topics: universal, developmental, and health self-care needs. The researchers maintained that the ability to practice self-care skills is subject to different internal and external factors in addition to the social context to which the mothers belong.

Researchers (Norman, Sherburn, Osborne, & Galea, 2010) found that mothers who received physiotherapy lessons in combination with parenting instruction reported a significant improvement in their level of mental wellness. In accordance with this finding and with findings of additional research works carried out in this field, it is argued that the importance of self-care for the mother is a very significant factor and is invaluable for the mother's mental health and wellness, as well as for the child's health and development. For the mother to provide the best care for the child, she must first provide the best care for herself (Fader, 2021; Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021; Wisner, 2020).

A number of researchers have emphasized the need for attention and increased concern for women in the context of their parental functioning, especially in the period of a year after giving birth. The researchers found that mothers may develop severe situations of depression and anxiety after giving birth, and even more seriously may develop psychosis, in which they see and hear things that do not exist in reality (Fader, 2021).

Webb, Bloch, Coyne, Chung, Bennett, and Culhane (2013) researched the relationship between the mothers' physical problems, which were created following birth, and their level of mental wellness. They found that as the mother has a greater number of physical problems after giving birth, her level of wellness and parental functioning is lower.

The researchers recommended the meticulous evaluation of the women's physical and emotional situation postpartum, asserting that professional factors can tailor for the mother an appropriate course of care and thus improve her level of wellness and quality of maternal functioning.

Another research study found that mothers who participated in a learning and support group after the birth, in which they received information, support, and sharing, were found later to have higher wellness. Here too there was a proposal to shape a policy of intervention already in the prenatal stage, with the aim of increasing the mothers' level of wellness (Barbieri, Soares, Ferrari, Demitto, & Tacla, 2013).

Another research work found that giving the mother knowledge before she delivers reduces her level of anxiety and increases her feeling of wellness (Ben Yishai, 2020).

In the period of pregnancy, there is a reevaluation of the value system and life priorities, social roles and relationships with others. Awareness and acceptance of pregnancy is the starting point for adapting to your life situation. If the woman does not accept her condition, it can lead to painful experiences, such as fear, anxiety and a sense of danger (Hristoova, 2020).

Langerman-Ziv (2018) recommends to mothers to reach a decision on a number of things that cause them a good feeling. Only the mother knows these things, and she alone must decide upon them. After her decision, she must carry out different activities she likes and in a measured manner. The assertion is that small amounts of happiness will strengthen the mother and will cause her to function in the best way towards her children.

Many research studies contend unequivocally the importance of self-care to the mother's mental wellness. Nevertheless, the findings arising from research works on this topic present that for the most part the mother's application to self-care is often lacking (Fader, 2021; Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021; Wisner, 2020).

Obstacles to Self-Care

Self-care requires practice and constant effort. It was found that the need for and legitimization of self-care among mothers are not perceived as natural and obvious. Many

research works show that there are different obstacles that prevent the mother from attributing importance to and meaningful space for her self-care. Change of awareness and giving a meaningful space for self-care require the mother's belief that self-care is vital for her and that she deserves it by right and not by grace. This was found to be very challenging for mothers, since society instructs that to be a good mother is to sacrifice their wellness to provide the child's needs. The enrooted perception in society and accordingly among the mothers is that in essence it is preferable to put the mother's needs last (Wisner, 2020). Accordingly, from the moment the child is born, the mother thinks first and foremost about his needs and puts the child at the top of her priorities and before her own needs. Mothers find it difficult to take time for themselves or to ask for help. They fight constantly the guilt that will come in any case of any activity of this kind. Whether the mother spends hours with her children or takes time for herself, she experiences guilt in each one of the actions. The self-care is perceived as a break from the stay with the children in order to do something the mother enjoys, time that passes and does not return at their expense and upbringing, and conflicts with the mother's desire and the ideal to which she aspired in the way to raise her children. The care of the children without the care for the mother's health and wellness has impact over time and leaves its mark eventually even in resentment that may be expressed in the quality of care for children (Fader, 2021).

A research study that examined self-care skills among postpartum mothers found that many mothers knew to express verbally the importance of the self-care but reported difficulty with finding the balance between providing the best care for the child and providing care of their physical and emotional health. The basis of the difficulty is the internal belief that the mother's lack of egocentrism is a synonym for good motherhood. It was further found that mothers who reported the allocation of time for themselves reported also a return to caring for the child in a calmer state. The research study found a differentiation between the mothers in the meaning of the self-care and enjoyment for themselves. For some mothers, the self-care time is for going to a café or going shopping for themselves, while other mothers will prefer to have a cosmetic treatment or to take a long shower, and so on. This research found that time, limited resources, difficulty asking help and setting boundaries appeared as barriers for the practice of self-care mainly in the period of time when the child is a toddler and dependent on the mother. The requirements

of the integration of the family life and the job barely left the mothers with the time to engage in restorative activities for them. This was more significant when referring to single-parent mothers than married mothers. An interesting datum was found among some of the mothers who reported the lack of the desire to delegate childcare tasks to the father, and it was also found when the father demonstrated good childcare ability. This phenomenon was also reported in situations in which the mother felt exhausted and overwhelmed by the load of roles she bears (Barkin & Wisner, 2013).

In addition to the care of the infant, many mothers are required to also care for the loads and management of the home, including cleaning and organizing the home, setting appointments for doctor visits, organizing daily activities, and future planning. Furthermore, there is the expectation that they will happily and easily host people who come to visit them and their infant. Many mothers are required to handle this burden, in addition to their return to work, the management of infant's transition to a childcare setting, and the care of the other children (Wisner, 2020). These obstacles have high costs that the mother and the child pay.

Implications of the Neglect of Self-Care

Many researchers have established in research the argument that the neglect of the mother's needs has negative implications on the mother and the child. A comprehensive research study carried out in the field found that the daily pressures of parenthood steadily accumulate without the parent's ability to take a break or rest. The pressures in the long term lead the parent to experience 'parental burnout', which is defined in the literature as critical exhaustion in the person's parenting role. The burnout is expressed in symptoms such as headaches, extreme exhaustion, and lack of emotional feeling. The burnout has implications also on the children, such as emotional distancing from the children, emotional exhaustion, parental neglect, thoughts of leaving, and even violence. It was found that different actions helped the parent lessen and even prevent parental burnout, for example, free time without the infant, walking, conversations with a friend or counselor, meditation, sleeping, massage, hobby, trip, shopping, and so (Wisner, 2020).

Barkin and Wisner (2013) found that research studies that used the IFSAC questionnaire for the assessment of the maternal functioning situation indicated women's difficulty to implement consistently skills of self-care, mainly in the postpartum period. The researchers brought examples of two research studies that reviewed skills of self-care among postpartum mothers. A research study carried out on two hundred postpartum mothers in Australia found that none of the women reported the full resumption in the months after the birth of the activities they had regularly undertaken beforehand. Another research study that reviewed women in postpartum depression found that the presence of postpartum depression predicted low self-care skill in addition to low functioning at home and in society.

A research study that examined the mother's self-care needs in the first days after giving birth found that the mother's self-care in these first days revolves around her physical needs, thus placing the emotional self-care at risk of neglect. The research emphasized that the ignoring of these emotional needs has a negative impact on the health of the mother and her family. For example, the mother's insufficient sleep is associated with maternal depression, which in turn influences the likelihood of the risk of paternal depression and even depression among the other children at home (Lambermon et al., 2020).

Additional research studies illustrated more extensively additional and significant implications of the neglect on the self-care. Evidence collected in recent years indicates the tiredness among parents as a factor with influence on low positive connection and increased hostility in the interaction between the parent and the child. The factor of tiredness has not been extensively investigated until now in the context of the parents' health and is very meaningful in the relationship between the parent and the child. A research study that examined the relationship found that tiredness is a negative factor mediating the parental behavior important to the child's welfare and development. The tiredness is an experience of profound and chronic fatigue that does not result from strenuous exercise and is not reduced by sleep or rest. In this research study, the researchers found that high self-care and low self-criticism were related also to low levels of tiredness among the parents. Tiredness was found to be related to a situation of distress and deficient physical and mental

health and accordingly influenced parenting behaviors. In the continuation, strategies such as engagement in self-care behaviors such as reduction of the daily demands, healthy sleep, improvement of the quality of the nutrition and physical activity, social support and getting help, positively influenced the quality of the parent-child interaction and both the parent's and the child's wellness (Chau & Giallo, 2015).

The infrastructure upon which it is possible to build and promote self-care is the understanding of the meaning of self-compassion and the ability to enable it. Mothers who have compassion for themselves show kindness, understanding, and self-care and even accept mistakes that happen with forgiveness and as a part of the whole of being human. These mothers were found in studies to be less likely to self-criticize (Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021).

In the continuation of this finding, a research study that engaged in the relationship between self-care and self-criticism found that there is a relationship between the two and this was connected to the factor of the parents' physical and mental health. This research study found that parents with high skills in self-care tended to have low self-criticism. These parents had better physical and mental health, while parents with high self-criticism had low physical and mental health. These findings were supported by research studies that reported the relationship between self-compassion and mental health among the parents of children with a disorder on the autism spectrum. These research studies found that high levels of self-compassion were linked with low levels of depression and parental stress. Another research found that low levels of self-compassion were linked with high levels of parental distress (Bohadana, Morrisey, & Paynter, 2019; Keinhuis & Avdagic, 2021; Neff & Faso, 2015).

The mother's self-care is also linked to confidence in the parenting functioning and her perception about her interactions with the child. This emphasizes the importance of self-care and self-compassion for the child's mental health. Research studies found that parents with high self-criticism felt less skilled and confident in their parental functioning. They reported their difficult behavior with their children, when they argue with them or yell at them. These parents also reported less enjoyment from the parenting and addressed it as demanding and frustrating. In contrast, parents who reported a regular activity as a

part of the self-care felt more skilled and confident in their parental functioning, even in times of stress. They also reported greater enjoyment from the parenting (Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021).

The research studies note the considerable meaning of the mothers' self-care in relation to their children. Children learn from and are greatly influenced by their caregiving figures, who constitute a model of imitation for them. A child learns to internalize self-compassion when he sees his mother is generous towards herself and cares for her needs (Fader, 2021).

Similar data were found in additional researches, but the studies also address the difference between groups of parents in their ability to practice self-care and emphasize the importance of additional variables that influence this. Certain groups of parents will need more support in the practice of self-care skills. These are groups of parents of small children, single-parent mothers, and mothers who have additional roles, parents who lack time and economic resources, parents with a high level of tiredness, parents of children with special needs, and parents with mental and physical problems. A research study performed on parents with depression found that mothers who reported high levels of self-compassion tended to be less critical of their children in comparison to mothers who reported low self-compassion. Furthermore, parents with high self-compassion reported less expression of distress with the negative feelings that arise from their children (Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021; Psychogiou, Legge, Parry, Mann, Nath, Ford, & Kuyken, 2016).

Research studies found that the variable of self-criticism has a strong unequivocal relationship with parental safety and parental wellness. The inner message that parents reinforce in themselves regarding the quality of their parenting is very significant to their perception of wellness, and it is important to help parents convey the right message towards themselves (Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021).

The barriers to the best self-care and conversely the development of self-criticism are enrooted in the mother as a part of society's expectations. Society on the surface will encourage and even demand certain activities as part of the mother's self-care, good, and well-being. However, in essence these are additional messages about the expectations and

roles the mother is required to fulfill, without support and tools for advancing the self-care. For example, although some will argue that the role of the mother's learning for the acquisition of a certain education has the character of the investment in the individual himself, these occupations require meeting a time schedule and performing tests and tasks, thus requiring of the working mother many strengths and resources (Kulik & Liberman, 2016).

A role that has the character of the mother's self-development is a role of the investment in the individual himself alone and mainly its nature is rest and entertainment. Here too some will argue that this role is undertaken from the mother's free choice, for her personal development, and does not obligate her. However, here too through the in-depth observation it is possible to find that individual leisure activities are pure entertainment out of the mother's true free choice and constitute enjoyment for her. The rest of the activities are found to complement the lack existing in the everyday or to compensate for it, for example, the sport that is required for the mother's health and frequently is not enjoyed by the working mother (Kulik & Liberman, 2016).

In addition, even if this is a true leisure activity or activity compensating for a lack, the holding of the activity demands the allocation of time and the investment of economic resources and considerable energy, which frequently take from the working mother the resources allocated to the roles of the home or the work. Accordingly, the argument is that in our era the entire constellation of these roles is carried out by most of the mothers, and although the mother sometimes may benefit from the doing of the leisure activities, in parallel this type of activity also contributes to the development of a feeling of load and stress (Kienhuis & Avdagic, 2021; Kulik & Liberman, 2016).

It appears that the mother's self-care is a meaningful and essential factor in her mental and physical health and constitutes an important part of best maternal functioning. To advance processes of the reduction of obstacles to self-care, it is necessary to effect a more extensive change that begins with social policy and making support and applicable tools accessible to the mother.

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