

Maternal mental health coalition sheds light on post-partum needs

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(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)



It was an isolating experience, Amanda O'Donoghue remembers. After the birth of her two beloved sons, she fell into postpartum depression.

"As a new mom, it can be very jarring," O'Donoghue, 36, said. "All of a sudden, you're locked in the house for eight months nursing this little

child who can't speak."

O'Donoghue wasn't the only one suffering. Her former neighbor, a mother to a young son, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She was suicidal but couldn't afford therapy, O'Donoghue said. So, she rounded up friends who helped raise funds for her neighbor to have six months of therapy.

More: [Mother's Day is coming with challenges aplenty](#)

"When that happened, I was just like, how many is this happening to — how many people are unable to get therapy?" she said.

The thought prompted the Tallahassee portrait photographer to start [Partum Me](#), a play on the phrase "pardon me." It's a blog where local women can tell their stories of postpartum struggles to help each other feel less alone.

But stigmas around mental health have hindered women from writing their stories for her blog, O'Donoghue said. Many shy away from giving away their intimate struggles.

To dispel stigmas and help women get help, Dr. Heather Flynn, a clinical psychologist, associate professor and Vice Chair for Research at Florida State's College of Medicine, helped start both the [Florida Maternal Mental Health Collaborative](#) and Leon County's Maternal Mental Health Coalition/Advisory Board in 2015.

More: [To my mother, who struggled with depression](#)

At recent commission meetings, the city and county declared the second week of May as Perinatal Mental Health Awareness Week.



Faculty member Heather Flynn, College of Medicine. (Photo: Bill Lax/FSU Photography Service)

According to the American Psychological Association, 1 in 7 women experiences postpartum depression. Symptoms include loss of pleasure, change in eating habits, anxiety, feelings of misery and worthlessness and lack of sleep.

Many don't receive the treatment they need.

"Most women who have maternal depression and anxiety don't get screened," said Flynn, who has researched extensively on the topic of depression and treatment of it in women.

The coalition's top priority includes making sure women are diagnosed and treated. That includes improving local clinicians' training in perinatal-specific programs, such as screenings and referrals, and making sure nurses and doctors are up to speed on evidence-based approaches for perinatal depression and anxiety.

"The training of obstetricians in addressing mental health is lagging behind their training in other medical conditions," Flynn said. "Even if a woman does get screened and get the positive screening, it's unlikely she'll be connected with clinicians who are well-trained to address those issues."

That's why the coalition is working on creating a referral network of mental health resources in town.

"It's arguably the highest-impact work I felt like I could do," Flynn said about perinatal mental health. She's been studying depression for more than two decades. "If you could prevent transmitting risk of this major condition to the next generation, it just seemed like the right place to put my energies and attention."

Additionally, women of color experience have an even greater lack of access to care, according to a study by University at Buffalo in New York, which states "estimates reveal that up to 60 percent of women of color don't receive services."

The coalition has partnered with the Southside and Frenchtown Advisory Council to take a pulse on the needs of women of color in that area.

"Other than a six-week postpartum visit, women have a significant drop off in care for themselves after they deliver their baby," Flynn said. If women miss that OBGYN appointment, their mental health could go completely undetected, she said.

"It's something that requires immediate treatment with monitoring," she said, "to make sure the person is getting better."

Resources

Mothers' Mental Health at Florida State University: mothersmentalhealth.org

Mental health resource directory: med.fsu.edu/mentalhealth

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