**Stress & Relationships**

**Research Summary | Fall 2011**

**Background**
- Life stressors such as having a serious illness, a death in the family, or money problems can make us unhealthy.
- Dealing with pregnancy and parenthood can strain our relationships and negatively impact couples and their baby. Additional life stressors may further challenge romantic relationships.

**Community & Clinical Relevance**
- Disadvantaged populations experience a large number of life stressors which may contribute to disparities in health across socioeconomic status.
- Research shows that experiencing stressful life events during pregnancy can influence both men’s and women’s mental health and depression during her pregnancy.
- Expecting fathers have been neglected in research on experiences during pregnancy; few studies have obtained direct report of stressors and depression from both members of an expecting couple.

**Research Questions**
- Is an expecting mother’s depression impacted by her partner’s stress?
- Do social support and the strength of a relationship protect against the negative effects of life stressors?

**Our Participants**
- 44% of participants were African-American, 38% Latino, 14% White, and 4% were of another self-reported race.
- The average age of mothers was 18.7 years old and 21.3 years old for fathers.

**Our Study**

We asked 296 young couples what it is like to become parents.

- To enroll, women had to be between the ages of 14 and 21, in their third trimester of pregnancy, and in a relationship with the father of their baby. Their partners had to be at least 14 years old.
- Participants were recruited from obstetrics and gynecology clinics in four university-affiliated hospitals in Connecticut.
- Couples completed 3 interviews—the first in the third trimester, then at six and twelve months postpartum—regardless of whether they stayed together.
- Participants answered questions about their physical and mental health, sexual behavior, relationship quality, and parenting experiences.

“*My life has been hectic preparing for the baby; working, moving and trying to get everything done before he gets here. It has been hard financially getting everything the baby will need*” - Mom-to-be 2008
FINDINGS

STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS
- 91% of couples experienced at least 1 stressful life event in the previous 6 months.
- 75% of women and 76% of men experienced at least 1 event in the past 6 months.
- Experience of stressful life events was associated with increased depression among both men and women.
- We found that women who had partners who reported more stressors were more likely to be depressed.

BUFFERS OF STRESS
- Social support, family functioning, and relationship satisfaction all buffered the influence of stressful events on depression.
- Women’s depression was significantly influenced by their partner’s experience of stressful life events.

Common life stressors experienced in past 6 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Percent of Couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item lost or stolen</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Issues</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money Problems</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IMPLICATIONS
- Depression is a risk factor for poor birth outcomes and biological factors including low birth weight, preterm delivery, and postpartum depression.
- Interventions that improve relationships, support systems, and family functioning may reduce the negative impact of stressors, experienced both personally and by a romantic partner, on the emotional health of young expectant parents.

Pregnancy can be a stressful time for young couples. The buildup of additional life stressors may increase the negative health effects of stress.

ABOUT US

PARTNRS, PARENTING AND RELATIONSHIP TRANSITION AND RISK STUDY, SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AMONG YOUNG EXPECTANT FATHERS AND THEIR ADOLESCENT PARTNERS AS THEY TRANSITION FROM PREGNANCY TO PARENTHOOD. WE ARE DEDICATED TO UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTH AMONG YOUNG PARENTS, WITH THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF BUILDING PROGRAMS THAT WILL STRENGTHEN FAMILIES, IMPROVE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, AND DECREASE THE INCIDENCE OF HIV AND STDS.

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