Navigating the transition to motherhood: The buffering role of social support in the relationship between unmet expectations and anxiety and depression

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SRIP 2019 Symposium: Paths of Support
The Contribution of Different Sources of Support to Mothers’ and Fathers’ Personal Growth in the Transition to Parenthood

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Background
Welcoming a child into a family fundamentally changes the lives of its members and may lead to both positive and negative psychological changes. Recent years signify the opportunity to thrive in the process of the transition to parenthood, as a result of having to cope with its unique demands and stresses.

Aims and Objectives
The current study aimed at examining personal growth among mothers and fathers in the unique and sensitive period of the transition to parenthood, while focusing on different potential sources of support.

Method
152 first-time mothers and 119 first-time fathers, 6-24 months after the birth of their first offspring, completed a series of structured, self-report questionnaires: parenting stress, self-awareness (reflection and rumination), perceived social support (from own mother, spouse, and a professional), and personal growth.

Results
Mothers perceived more support from their own mother and higher levels of personal growth on some of the dimensions, as compared to fathers. Among all the participants, higher levels of social support from all three sources contributed to higher personal growth, above and beyond the contribution of sociodemographic variables and self-awareness. In addition, both linear and curvilinear associations were found between stress and several dimensions of personal growth.

Interpretation / Discussion
New parents can make use of several sources of social support during the transition to parenthood, which may help them experience more personal growth.

Conclusions
The importance of this study lies in broadening the theoretical knowledge about the resources available to men and women during the transition to parenthood, which contribute to various dimension of personal growth. The findings can assist in developing therapeutic interventions targeted new parents facing this challenging and complex life transition.

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Background
Expectations of pregnant women regarding parenthood are often positive. Nevertheless, their experiences are not always in line with these expectations. Unmet parenthood expectations, when experiences are not as positive as expected, might lead to poorer adjustment to parenthood and to mental health problems. There are some indications that social support might have a protective role.

Aims and Objectives
To test the buffering hypothesis, i.e. that social support reduces the negative effect of unmet expectations on anxiety and depression across the transition to motherhood.

Method
98 Dutch mothers (Mage = 31.81; 62% primiparous) completed a questionnaire four months before giving birth (average) about their expectations regarding motherhood, feelings of anxiety and depression (T1) and a second questionnaire eight months after giving birth (average) regarding their motherhood experiences, feelings of anxiety and depression and experienced social support (T2). Multiple regression analyses were used with anxiety and depression at T2 as the dependent factors, unmet parenthood expectations (differences between expectations and experiences), social support (a lot or a little) and the interaction between unmet parenthood expectations and social support as the independent factors, and anxiety and depression at T1 as control variables.

Results
Mothers with unmet expectations (when experiences are not as positive as expected) had increased feelings of anxiety and depression. This relationship existed regardless of mothers’ experienced social support.

Interpretation / Discussion
To help mothers make the transition to motherhood, one could steer towards realistic expectations in pregnancy consultations and courses.

Conclusions
Mothers report more feelings of anxiety and depression when parenthood expectations during pregnancy are not met during the first year of the child. Social support does not have a buffering role in this relationship.

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