

The effects of physical activity on depressive symptoms after the loss of a child

It is not uncommon for mothers who are overwhelmed with grief after losing their baby to develop significant anxiety and depression.

Losing a baby through stillbirth or a neonatal death can be one of the most devastating experiences one will ever have to endure during a lifetime. Huberty et al. (2014) state that women may experience significant mental, physical and social maladies, including alterations in appetite and sleep patterns, guilt, shame and depression after giving birth (both live and stillbirth). According to Gold et al. (2016), bereaved mothers are seven times more likely to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), four times more likely to be diagnosed with clinical depression, and twice as likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. The long-lasting adverse effects of stillbirth may even impact the health of the mother and child in subsequent pregnancies.

Research has shown that there are numerous counselling strategies and programs, as well as medical interventions that health care professionals can draw upon to aid depression sufferers. One of the simplest techniques that has shown to improve depression is physical activity. Huberty, Leiferman, Gold et al. (2014) conducted a study of 175 women who had experienced stillbirth, to look more closely at the impact of physical activity on their symptoms of depression. Out of these women, those who participated in physical activity reported significantly lower depressive symptoms compared to women who did not participate in any form of physical activity. It is important to return to exercise and general fitness programs gradually after having a baby. Short, gentle sessions only are advised as the muscles recover. If an activity is painful or you find yourself holding your breath, stop immediately and rest. Slow and gentle sessions are recommended. Physiologically the ligaments and support structures of the body are not back to full strength for up to a year postnatally, so activities such as walking, swimming, aqua aerobics and pilates are a perfect option. Avoiding high impact activities that place too much strain on the supporting ligaments is preferable.

Overall, the study by Huberty, Leiferman, Gold et al. (2014) established that physical activity may serve as a unique opportunity to help women cope with the multiple mental sequelae after a stillbirth. It can improve depressive symptoms in a number of populations and has been shown to be more efficacious than psychiatric medications (Herring, et al., 2012). Women in the study reported using activities such as walking, jogging or yoga interventions to cope with their depressive symptoms successfully, and when active felt better physically, had a better mindset, and had more energy, which also impacted subsequent pregnancies. (Huberty, Coleman et al. 2014)

References

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