

Experiential Avoidance as a Mediator of Risk Factors for Higher Order Internalizing Psychopathology in the Perinatal Period

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Abstract

Objectives: Perinatal psychopathology can be damaging. This study examined the strength of the associations between risk factors and all perinatal mood and anxiety disorder symptoms while assessing the mediating effect of experiential avoidance. **Method:** Participants ($N = 246$) completed assessments during pregnancy (28-32 weeks) and the postpartum (6-8 weeks). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine associations between risk factors and latent factors: Distress (composed of depression, generalized anxiety, irritability, and panic symptoms); Fear (social anxiety, agoraphobia, specific phobia, and obsessive-compulsive); and Bipolar (mania and obsessive-compulsive). **Results:** During pregnancy, past psychiatric history, anxiety sensitivity, maladaptive coping, and age were significant risk factors. In the postpartum, negative maternal attitudes and past psychiatric history were only risk factors for symptoms that composed Distress. Experiential avoidance mediated the relation between maladaptive coping and symptoms that composed Fear. **Conclusion:** It is important to assess for psychological risk factors starting in pregnancy. This study identified critical risk factors that are associated with the underlying commonality among perinatal mood and anxiety symptoms. Some of the risk factors as well as the mediator are malleable (negative maternal attitudes, experiential avoidance), creating new possibilities for prevention and treatment of perinatal mood and anxiety disorder symptoms.

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