



Why Breastfeeding Protects New Mothers' Mental Health

Recent Findings on Inflammation, Postpartum Depression, and Breastfeeding

-- by Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, PhD, IBCLC, FAPA

Texas-based [Professor Kathleen Kendall-Tackett](#) will be in Hangzhou in May for a 10-day physician training program of the Hangzhou AIMA Maternity Hospital. For more information about her studies, visit [UppityScienceChick.com](#), [BreastfeedingMadeSimple.com](#), [Kathleen.com](#), and [PraeclarusPress.com](#)

Over the past three decades, researchers have discovered that inflammation is the underlying cause of depression. Our bodies respond to stressors by activating our stress system, which includes the inflammatory response system. There are a number of experiences that we know increase our risk for depression. These include lack of social support, marital or relationship difficulties, infant illness or prematurity, low income, pain, fatigue and sleep deprivation, and history of psychological trauma. When we experience these stressors, our bodies treat them as threats to our survival and respond by increasing inflammation.

Postpartum women are especially vulnerable because their inflammation levels naturally rise during the last trimester of their pregnancy—a time when they are also at highest risk of depression. Understanding that inflammation is the underlying cause helps us know how to both prevent and treat depression.

Breastfeeding Protects Maternal Mental Health

Breastfeeding has an important role to play in mothers' postpartum mental health. Groër and Davis noted that breastfeeding benefits mothers, in part, because it lowers stress and increases nurturing behaviour. One reason is its impact on sleep. Exclusively breastfeeding mothers have better sleep than their mixed or formula-feeding counterparts. It appears that exclusive breastfeeding is a different physiological experience than mixed-feeding, so that when mothers supplement, they lose the physiological benefit of breastfeeding on their sleep.

Does this mean a breastfeeding mother never gets depressed? No. Sometimes they do. But even when that happens, breastfeeding protects both mothers and babies.

Breastfeeding Protects Babies When Their Mothers are Depressed

Hundreds of studies have found that maternal depression can be harmful to babies and children. Depressed mothers tend to be less responsive to their babies' cues than non-depressed mothers, which is highly stressful for babies. The effects of being raised by a chronically depressed mother or father can last many years past infancy. A 20-year follow-up of children of depressed parents, and a comparison group of children of non-depressed parents, found that the adult children of depressed parents had three times the rate of major depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse.

Breastfeeding Helps Break the Intergenerational Cycle of Abuse

Mothers with a history of childhood abuse often wonder if they will be good parents. Some even wonder if they will abuse their own children. A recent study found that there were two factors that predicted the intergenerational transmission of abuse: maternal depression and impaired maternal sleep. Breastfeeding helps with both.

Summary and Conclusions

The results from recent studies demonstrate that breastfeeding has a much larger role in protecting mothers' and babies' mental health than we have previously believed. Because breastfeeding increases maternal responsiveness, it makes the day-to-day experience of mothering more tolerable. It increases the chances that babies will be securely attached, which means that their stress and inflammatory response systems will not be chronically up-regulated.

Breastfeeding is so much more than just a method of feeding. It's a way of caring for a baby that will provide a lifetime's worth of good health because it provides a way for mothers to connect with their babies—even if they did not experience that kind of care themselves.

In short, breastfeeding can make the world a happier and healthier place, one mother and baby at a time.



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