

Giving Birth: Important Differences between Australia and your Country of Birth

There can be differences between Australian culture and the culture of your country of origin that can impact on the experience of giving birth. The differences between the cultures can impact on:

- Social support available to the mother
- Community expectations of the mother
- Father's expectations of the mother

By not considering the differences between the cultures, communities and individuals can have unreasonable expectations of new mothers. These expectations can have negative consequences for the new mother's physical and mental health.

Social Support

In many parts of the world, raising a child involves the family, extended family, neighbours and community. This is indicated by the saying "*it takes a whole village to raise a child*". It is not uncommon for members of the new-mother's family to move into her house; or for the mother and her newborn to move into the house of a family member. This arrangement can last up to six weeks.

Here in Australia, migrants and refugees may not have any family available. Therefore, the new-mother may have limited support.

Community Expectations

As mentioned in the previous section, new mothers in other parts of the world may receive significant support from family members. This support can come in the form of cooking and cleaning of the house. Accordingly, when the new mother has visitors, the visitors expect to see a clean house with some food prepared for them.

However, if the new mother in Australia does not have her family with her to provide support, she may find it difficult to look after the baby, in addition to keeping a clean house and having food prepared for guests. The community may not understand this and if the house is not up to standard, they may begin to gossip about the mother. These expectations can add pressure for new mothers.

Expectations of the Father

As mentioned above, the support a new mother receives from her family assists in maintaining the household and even the needs of the father. Accordingly, when the father returns from work in the country of origin, the household is maintained and his meal is prepared. However in Australia, the male may come home from work and the house may be messy and dinner may not be prepared. He may become angry with his wife and say "*my mother raised five children and kept a clean house, why can't you?*"

However, the father may not realize that raising children in Australia can be very different to raising a child back home. The mother may also begin to see herself as a failure without realizing the difference.

Useful coping Strategies for Pregnancy and Early Parenthood

There are many things that women and their partners can do to make the experience of pregnancy and parenting easier. These are some suggestions:

For Mothers

- Lots of things change during pregnancy and change can be stressful. Be aware of this and talk about it.
- Plan to have additional support in the first month or two by asking your partner or a family member to stay at home with you.
- Discuss with your partner the difference you think a baby will make to your lives and the changes you'll need to make, e.g. negotiate ways to share household chores.
- Try not to make major life changes (move house, change jobs) in the first few months after you have your baby, or late in pregnancy.
- Share your concerns with someone you trust.
- Have regular health check-ups.
- Trust your own judgment and remind yourself that things will become more manageable as you adjust to your new role.
- Keep a sense of humour!
- Involve your partner in the care of your baby from the beginning.
- Try to rest or sleep when your baby is sleeping.

- Get to know your local Maternal and Child Health Nurse or mothers' group to extend your support system.
- Find someone reliable and trustworthy to baby-sit so you can spend time alone with your partner.

For Fathers

- Encourage your partner to seek professional help if needed and even accompany her.
- Be aware of your own health and wellbeing and seek professional help yourself if you feel depressed.
- Provide reassurance and support to your partner.
- Actively become involved in the care of your new baby.
- Try to be understanding of your partner's needs and modify your expectations of her.
- Accept reasonable offers of help from others.
- Plan some time together as a couple and do some activities together that you enjoyed before you had your baby.
- Be aware that women often have decreased sexual desire following childbirth. Show affection and intimacy without the pressure for sex.

References

Depression during Pregnancy and Early parenthood. (2003). NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service. NSW Health Department.

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