

Postpartum depression: one clinical entity but various types of failure to enter motherhood constellation

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The primary maternal preoccupation

(Winnicott, 1956)

- ▶ “Almost an illness” that a mother **must experience and recover** from, in order to create and sustain an environment that can meet the physical and psychological needs of the infant.
- ▶ This **special state of heightened sensitivity** is alike a dissociative state that heightens the mother’s ability to anticipate the infant’s needs, and learn its unique signals.
- ▶ Winnicott emphasized the **crucial importance of such a stage for the infant’s self development** (even before what we know today about the impact of early interactive experiences on the brain development)

The biological substrate of MP

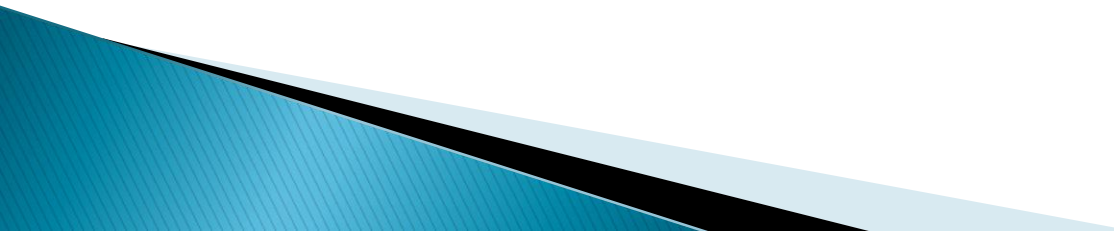
- ▶ Leckman & Feldman have shown the link between parental preoccupation and oxytocin secretion in mothers as well as in fathers.

What D. Stern has added to Winnicott's concept of MP

- ▶ Based on numerous psychotherapies, D. Stern postulated that the MP is not only a transient psychic *state*, but a real new, unique psychic *organization*:

“As a psychic organizer, this “constellation will determine a new set of action tendencies, sensibilities, fantasies, fears and wishes....Its duration is very variable, lasting months or years”

The Motherhood Constellation (MC)

- ▶ It is not a derivative of already existing psychic constructs, it is a unique and independent psychic triad: *mother's mother-mother-baby*, that becomes the dominant organizing axis.
 - ▶ It impacts the kinds of problems for which they seek psychotherapy, as well as the form of therapeutic alliance they most need.
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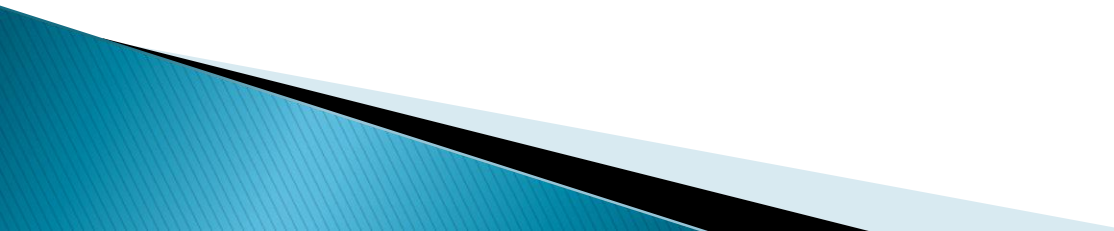
The four themes of the MC

- ▶ The life growth theme
 - The power of this theme is enormous and long lasting because it is about animal vitality and creativity. Does she have Intuitive parenting skills.
- ▶ The primary relatedness theme
 - Can she develop the “heightened sensitivity” and intense identification with baby, can she read him, will she fall in love with her baby?
- ▶ The supporting matrix theme
 - Fathers have an increasing role in providing this support in nuclear families
 - Re engagement with maternal figures, awakening of attachment representations

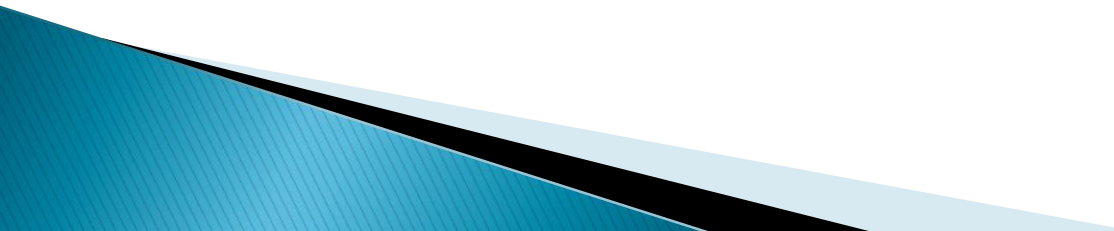
▶ The identity reorganization theme

“The new mother must shift her center of identity from daughter to mother, from wife to parent, from careerist to matron...unless she can accomplish these transformations, the three other tasks in the motherhood constellation will be compromised”.

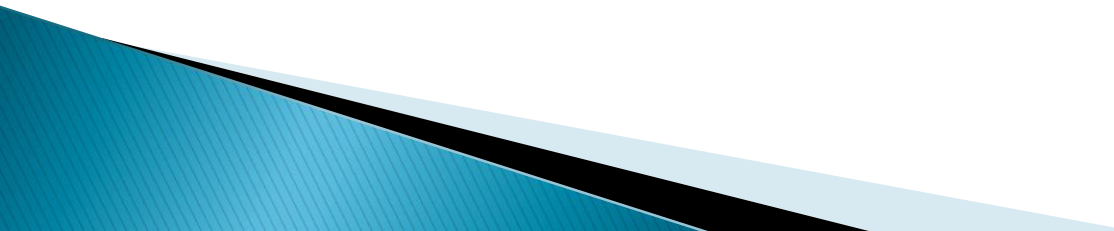
This process of reorganization requires new mental work, and the need for models is evident

- ▶ In search of models, the mother, in her moment-by-moment everyday interactions with the baby, will remember feelings and memories from her own past with her parental figures.
 - ▶ These memories are at the same time of her mother's own infancy (the Inside baby) and of her mother's parenting behavior (the Inside parent). A dialogue between the two starts....
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The MC is not universal, and is not innate: there are hormonal influences that “push” the new parent to develop some form of the MC, but the socio-cultural conditions seem to play a dominant role.

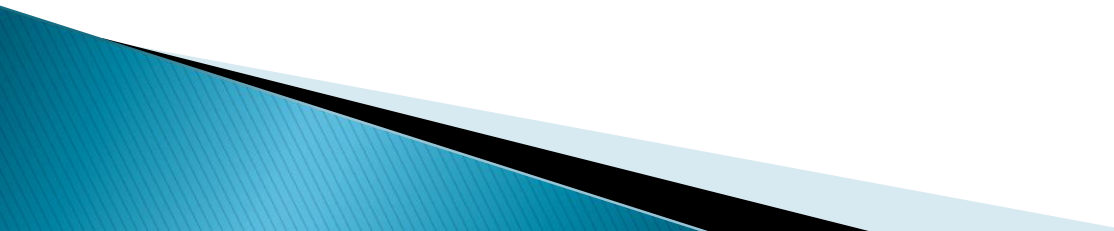


The impact of Western socio-cultural factors on MC

1. The society places a great value on babies' survival, well-being, and optimal development.
 2. The baby is supposed to be desired, and mother is expected to love him/her.
 3. The culture highly values the maternal role, in spite of the fact that mother is not given training nor support to fulfill the role.
 4. The mother has the ultimate responsibility, with or without support from father and others.
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- ▶ The society has a range of tolerance for the strength and quality of the motherhood constellation a mother develops, but not beyond the threshold of pathological maternal behaviors (neglect, abuse...)

Clinical use of the Motherhood constellation

- ▶ The motherhood constellation with its four components, provides the most convincing axis of reference for the mother's side of most mother–infant problems.
 - ▶ According to Stern, it is equivalent to how the oedipus complex has for the classical neuroses.
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Back to the cases

- ▶ These two cases clearly illustrates what D. Stern meant by writing:

“The way that mothers enter motherhood constellation depend on the pre-pregnancy personality structure and their early past experiences”.

Both cases have diagnoses of PPD with severe difficulty to engage with their baby, but they are very different in their dynamics, and consequently in the course of Tx and in the infant's prognosis.

