

Program Offers Connection for Struggling New Moms

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The Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative is expanding treatment options for women with postpartum depression. The six-week online program is designed for women with mild to moderate symptoms. The cooperative's Postpartum Wellness Initiative for South Jersey assists an estimated 1,200 mothers a year. (Photo: USGirl, Getty Images/iStockphoto)

South Jersey mothers struggling with postpartum depression have a new tool to help them fight back.

The Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative's Postpartum Wellness Initiative for South Jersey will roll out an online treatment option this month called MomMoodBooster. New to the state, the free six-week program is designed for women with mild to moderate symptoms.

Susan Ellis Murphy, the initiative's coordinator, said she hopes the state-funded program will reach women who have trouble accessing care because they don't have enough time, or are unable to find child care or transportation.

An estimated 1,200 women reach out to the initiative for help each year, but some aren't able to attend support groups. Ellis Murphy expects the online program will be especially helpful for women who live in rural parts of South Jersey.

"This web intervention is innovative in the fact that she can do it in her pajamas," Ellis Murphy noted. "She doesn't have to leave her home — we're going to her, and going to her on her time."

Mothers will get plenty of backup as they learn coping skills. The self-care program includes support from a South Jersey perinatal mood disorder specialist, who will check in with moms to make sure their symptoms are improving. Participants learn how to manage their moods, increase pleasant activities and decrease negative thoughts.

The program is an additional layer of support, Ellis Murphy added. Women who need a higher level of care and individual counseling can still get it.

Dr. Michael O'Hara, an expert on postpartum depression at The University of Iowa, tested the program early in its development and found significant improvement in patients' symptoms. He said it's based on principles of cognitive behavior therapy, and uses practical ways to help mothers remember how to reduce stress, relax and have fun.

"Many women in postpartum depression really feel tied to their home and focus exclusively on the baby without taking care of themselves," O'Hara said. The program helps them learn how to interrupt negative, anxious thoughts, and includes information for their partners.

Between 15 and 20 percent of new mothers experience depression, O'Hara noted. And children of depressed mothers are at risk of developing depression themselves, either as children or adults, making the postpartum period a "critical time" to focus on wellness.

"The longer the depression continues, the more difficult it is to treat," O'Hara said. "Anytime we can get in early and either prevent it or treat it early on, women are going to be much better off."

To learn more about the program, women can call the initiative's warm line at (856) 675-5295.

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