

Overview of Maternal Depression and Fortalezas Familiares

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CARMEN VALDEZ: Although we often think of depression as a clinical disorder that can be diagnosed, that can be treated, depression is really much more than just a diagnosis. It's actually a very painful, persistent, and confusing experience for the person who lives it.

And in fact, it's such a confusing experience that many of the mothers we work with explain it in terms of metaphors. They often talk about it as feeling trapped, as though they've fallen down a well that keeps getting deeper and deeper and that they can't get out of. Or they talk about depression as a slow boil, something that is always there, no matter what, in their lives.

And part of the reason why it's such a painful experience is because of the circumstances-- environmental, family, interpersonal, as well as genetic, and as well as biological reasons that lead to the depression or that contribute to the depression.

Because depression, as I mentioned, is an extension of normal feelings, we tend to expect that we can just snap out of it. And in fact, we commonly hear loved ones say, why can't you just get out of bed? Or why can't you just do things with the family so you can feel better? Or why don't you have the motivation?

And it's almost as if the person who is depressed wants to be depressed, or is using the depression as a form of control in the marital relationship or in the family relationship. And that's definitely not the case.

What is the case is that people who talk about feeling depressed often talk about it as needing to take care of themselves, needing to be alone, needing to be isolated from others, because it's a way for them to take care of themselves and all the trauma they've experienced, or the difficulties they've experienced in their lives.

In the case of immigrant women, there's an interesting pattern. And it's one that's often been referred to as the immigrant paradox. And what the immigrant paradox refers to is that when women, and in this case, Latina women, when they first arrive in the US, they actually have better mental health outcomes. They come to this country with much hope and resilience and willingness to sacrifice and work hard for their family, in order to secure safety and better economic opportunities for the family.

But what happens over the years is that this resilience and this well-being erode over time with length of stay in this country. And it's very unfortunate because the reasons why they come to this country are those reasons that also put a lot of pressure on women.

The reason why it's concerning that women experience depression in the child-rearing years is because these women in Latino culture play very important roles. They are often the primary

caretaker in terms of supporting children, guiding children, being there when children come home, nurturing, providing warmth. And it's a very strong value among Latinos that the mother is always there for the child, and that children should depend on their mothers for their needs, for having their needs taken care of.

So when a mother has depression, it has a double impact on the family, both because of all of the changes that happen within the family when a mother experiences depression, but also because culture instills the value that the mother is the center of the family. And if she's not able to provide those or enact those rules, then it becomes more worrisome and more of a burden for the family.

In our program, we often talk about depression as an embrace, for example. It's something that allows you to feel contained, feel protected and secure and stable, grounded. And in a sense, it gives you control over yourself, but then it doesn't let go. And even when you want to, it doesn't.

We also talk about it as a cloud that is constantly over your head. And no matter where you are, what you want, it doesn't let you see the world in the way that you want to see it.

The goal of Fortalezas Familiares is to help families reach a shared understanding of depression and family life, and to promote a sense of parenting confidence, or to increase parenting confidence, but also competence, because even if you feel efficacious, you may not necessarily have the tools that you need to support the family while you're experiencing depression.

Another goal is to help support children and partners in their coping, so that they understand what depression is, understand what their role is in supporting the person with depression, but then also for them to get their emotional needs met. And so we try to model and instill and educate family members about a need for positive family experiences, the importance of communication about day-to-day situations, but also about depression and other challenging topics within the family.

We also talk about how to communicate and convey warmth to children, even when we're feeling-- when that doesn't necessarily feel spontaneous in the moment. And then we also talk about family life and about assets that families bring. And so we talk about how parents can support children and help them fight discrimination or bias when they experience it.