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Empowering Mothers: The Impact of OT and PT on Postpartum Recovery and Well-Being

Enhanced Recovery After Delivery Scholarship

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## **Introduction**

The birth of a child is often framed as a euphoric event—a beautiful, transformative moment in a woman’s life. It is widely celebrated in media, literature, and society as the ultimate expression of joy, love, and hope. Yet, this idealized portrayal rarely reflects the full reality of childbirth and the postpartum period. While mothers may indeed experience profound joy, they also face numerous challenges that are seldom discussed in mainstream narratives.

## **Historical Perspective on Childbirth and Maternal Health**

For centuries, women have been expected to shoulder the responsibility of childbearing and rearing, often without the support or recognition that their physical, mental, and emotional well-being has completely changed. Historically, maternal roles were largely defined by societal norms and gender expectations that confined women to the home, where they were expected to fulfill their duties as caregivers and homemakers. This role was considered natural and even essential to a woman’s identity. Throughout history, maternal health, both physical and mental, was rarely prioritized, and support systems for women during and after childbirth were limited. In the early 20th century, medical interventions like anesthesia, antiseptics, and later, epidurals, helped alleviate some of the pain associated with childbirth, but they did not significantly change the cultural narrative surrounding motherhood (Katz, 2019). Even as the medical profession advanced, the focus was largely on the baby’s well-being, and the physical and emotional recovery of the mother was often an afterthought and often faced negative stigmas.

With the rise of the women's rights movement and the push for gender equality in the mid-20th century, societal attitudes toward women began to shift. Women sought greater autonomy over their reproductive health, advocated for better maternity care, and demanded recognition of the importance of postpartum health. This movement led to increased access to healthcare, more widespread use of family planning methods, and growing awareness of the need for psychological support for mothers (Lupton, 2017). Yet, despite these advances, the societal expectation that mothers should silently endure the challenges of childbirth and postpartum recovery still persists in many cultures today.

### **Disconnect Between Idealized and Actual Maternal Experience**

The media and popular culture continue to perpetuate an idealized version of motherhood—one that emphasizes perfection, joy, and fulfillment while downplaying the reality of the physical and emotional challenges. If you speak to many mothers about their birth experiences and postpartum journeys, a different reality emerges—one marked by physical exhaustion, emotional upheaval, and the often-overlooked toll that childbirth, operative delivery, and other maternal procedures take on both body and mind. This disconnect between the expectations of motherhood and the lived experiences of many women can lead to feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and even guilt. These unrealistic expectations often ignore the fact that recovery from childbirth is a gradual process that requires patience, support, and care

In reality, childbirth is an intense, physically demanding event, regardless of the method of delivery. Recovery from childbirth is a slow, multifaceted process that requires time, patience, and support (Choi & Lee, 2020). The emotional and physical toll it takes on a woman's body is often minimized or ignored by those who focus solely on the newborn. This leaves many women

feeling unprepared for the often overwhelming recovery process. Whether the birth is vaginal or cesarean, the body undergoes significant changes that require healing, both physically and emotionally. Many face complications like pelvic pain, urinary incontinence, and weakened pelvic floor muscles, which can affect their physical well-being and intimate relationships (Sims & Jacob, 2020) Mothers are expected to shoulder these burdens silently—bearing the pain, the exhaustion, and the emotional weight of recovery while managing the demands of infant care.

As we continue to advocate for a more holistic understanding of maternal health, the role of occupational and physical therapy becomes ever more crucial. These therapies not only help women recover physically but also challenge the long-standing narrative that motherhood is something to be endured silently. By recognizing the importance of addressing both the physical and emotional needs of mothers, we can begin to shift the conversation towards a more balanced, compassionate, and supportive approach to postpartum care. This shift is essential for empowering mothers to prioritize their well-being and receive the care and attention they deserve, ultimately allowing them to embrace their new roles with strength and resilience.

### **Impact of PCOS and Endometriosis on Maternal Health**

For women with conditions like Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) or Endometriosis, the postpartum period is often even more challenging. Both conditions are frequently misdiagnosed or underdiagnosed, leading to years of unaddressed symptoms. Endometriosis, which causes chronic pelvic pain, heavy menstrual bleeding, and infertility, is often mistaken for other conditions. Similarly, symptoms of PCOS—such as irregular periods and weight gain—are commonly attributed to other factors (Redwine, 2020). The journey to a proper diagnosis can take years, compounding the emotional burden of postpartum recovery.

Treatment for these conditions typically involves medication or surgery, but these interventions may only address symptoms and not provide long-term relief. In many cases, women find traditional treatments inadequate, especially during or after childbirth (Johnson, 2021). One distressing symptom common among individuals with PCOS or Endometriosis is dyspareunia (pain during sex), which can significantly impact intimate relationships and emotional well-being (Laganà et al., 2020).

### **Pelvic Floor Therapy as a Solution**

For women with pre-existing pelvic conditions, childbirth often exacerbates pelvic pain, discomfort during sex, and extends overall recovery. While medical treatments address immediate concerns, they often fail to manage long-term effects on pelvic health and sexual function. Pelvic floor therapy, including occupational and physical therapy (OT/PT), focuses on strengthening and relaxing the pelvic muscles, addressing pain, reducing inflammation, and improving function. It empowers individuals to actively participate in their recovery (Keenan & Blackwell, 2019). For women with conditions like Endometriosis or PCOS, pelvic floor therapy can help alleviate chronic pain and restore pelvic function, providing a more comprehensive, holistic solution (Booth, 2018).

### **Restoring Strength and Function**

Childbirth, regardless of delivery method, significantly strains the body, requiring a thorough recovery process. Various birthing methods—vaginal delivery, cesarean section, vacuum-assisted birth, and vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC)—each come with unique challenges and recovery needs. Therapists can support mothers by providing guidance on

positioning and mindfulness techniques during labor, helping them manage physical and emotional demands.

Occupational and physical therapy also play a vital role in perinatal health by educating mothers on conditions that increase maternal morbidity, such as gestational diabetes, severe bleeding, and hypertensive disorders. Early postpartum therapy interventions address musculoskeletal changes, pain management, and mobility restoration, reducing complications and lowering the risk of rehospitalization. By integrating therapy into postpartum care, mothers can receive proactive interventions that support long-term well-being.

After a cesarean section, mothers face challenges with abdominal strength and must follow specific precautions. Despite the challenges of cesarean recovery, therapy orders are minimal in acute settings, in contrast to other abdominal surgeries where therapy is routine. This discrepancy underscores the importance of early intervention for new mothers, helping them avoid injury and regain function during the critical postpartum period.

### **Rebuilding Confidence and Independence**

The postpartum period is often filled with emotional highs and lows. The pressure to “bounce back” can be overwhelming when recovery is slow. Occupational and physical therapists play a key role in helping new mothers rebuild their confidence and independence during this transition. Therapists address activities of daily living (ADLs)—tasks like bathing, dressing, and feeding—by developing strategies that make these activities easier and less physically demanding. Therapists can educate mothers on energy conservation techniques, such as sitting while dressing or creating routines that facilitate rest. They also provide guidance on proper body mechanics to minimize pain and strain during tasks like lifting the baby and

breastfeeding. These interventions are particularly vital for women with pre-existing conditions or those experiencing postpartum complications. As mothers gain skills to care for themselves and their babies, they rebuild their sense of autonomy and confidence. The ability to perform daily tasks without pain or strain enhances their emotional well-being and supports their physical recovery.

### **Supporting Maternal Mental Health**

The emotional challenges of the postpartum period are complex. Many mothers experience anxiety, depression, and other severe mental health conditions, such as OCD. Postpartum depression (PPD) affects one in seven new mothers, and many others experience anxiety or intrusive thoughts about their baby's health or their ability to care for their child. These challenges are often overlooked, as new mothers are expected to prioritize the needs of their newborn.

Occupational therapy can provide significant support by addressing both physical and emotional recovery. Therapists can incorporate mindfulness techniques, relaxation strategies, and cognitive-behavioral approaches to help mothers manage stress and anxiety. They may also focus on developing coping strategies, such as setting realistic expectations and practicing self-compassion. Additionally, therapists assist mothers in integrating self-care into their daily routines. Regular self-care practices—such as taking breaks, asking for help, and setting aside time for relaxation—can reduce stress and promote a healthier mental state. Unfortunately, many mothers do not receive follow-up evaluations until their six-week postpartum appointment, resulting in overlooked mental and physical health issues. By addressing both aspects of recovery, OT and PT ensure that mothers receive comprehensive care and support.

## **The Benefits of Home Health for New Mothers**

Postpartum recovery affects the entire family. The transition to parenthood is transformative not just for the mother but for the father, siblings, and extended family members that play critical roles in providing support. Many families are unprepared for the challenges of caring for a newborn and supporting maternal recovery. In addition to acute care therapy in the hospital, home health services are critical in providing postpartum support. Home health care allows mothers to receive ongoing therapy in the comfort of their own homes, which has been shown to improve recovery outcomes. The convenience of home visits means that mothers can receive personalized care without the stress of traveling to a clinic, which is especially beneficial for those with limited mobility or those recovering from surgery. Home health occupational and physical therapy services are tailored to each individual's needs, offering a more customized approach to recovery.

Home health services also help address the social isolation that many new mothers experience during the postpartum period. The therapist not only provides treatment but also offers emotional support, guidance, and reassurance, reducing feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Therapists can educate family members on proper lifting techniques, safe ways to assist the mother, and ergonomic strategies for caregiving activities. As well as, address areas of postpartum life that are often overlooked, such as resuming physical intimacy after childbirth. Many mothers experience discomfort or uncertainty about their bodies following delivery, and professional guidance can help couples navigate this transition. Studies have shown that mothers receiving home health care report higher satisfaction with their recovery and are more likely to adhere to therapy recommendations (Scholz et al., 2021). The presence of a therapist in the home

allows for a more holistic approach, addressing both physical and emotional needs in a way that promotes faster, more sustainable recovery.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the postpartum period is a time of immense transformation, where the physical and emotional demands on a mother are unparalleled. Occupational and physical therapy serve as bridges between medical intervention and daily life, ensuring that new mothers regain their strength, confidence, and autonomy. Early therapeutic intervention in postpartum care ensures that the mother not only survives childbirth but thrives in the months and years that follow, providing her with the tools to manage the demands of motherhood without sacrificing her own health and well-being. By prioritizing recovery and well-being, these therapeutic disciplines not only enhance maternal health but also lay the foundation for a healthier, more resilient family. In the quiet moments between birth and adapting to motherhood, OT and PT create a supported journey forward—one that empowers mothers to heal, thrive, and embrace their new roles with strength and confidence.

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