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Mothers in Recovery: A Phenomenological Study

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Mothers in Recovery: A Phenomenological Study

Catherine Henning, Investigator; Devin Moore, Investigator; Caroline Shanti, Faculty Advisor

Abstract

Mothers seeking recovery from substance use disorders face unique challenges, and treatment options that support women as both patients and as mothers are scarce. Empirical research pertaining to mothers in recovery is reflective of the limited treatment options available for this population. Recognizing that the level of perceived support from providers during early recovery can greatly impact overall outcomes, this study is designed to investigate the individual experiences of mothers as they seek treatment and begin their journey to recovery. Investigators used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to capture the emotional and logistical obstacles faced by mothers seeking inpatient treatment that meets their unique needs.

Background

More than half of all women who seek treatment for substance use disorder are either mothers or pregnant, yet few treatment programs are designed specifically for women with children (Greenfield, Back, Lawson & Brady, 2010). Programs rarely address family dynamics, and limited literature exists on the specific factors impeding treatment and recovery for mothers (Niccols, Milligan, Sword, Thabane, Henderson, & Smith, 2010). Treatment is focused on recovery from substance use, but limited programs address the unique challenges faced by recovering women with children.

Research Question

Recognizing that the level of perceived support from providers during early recovery can greatly impact overall outcomes, this study aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences of mothers seeking treatment for substance use disorders.

Methods

- Qualitative design
- 1:1 semi-structured interviews with open ended questions
- Transcendental phenomenological approach to data analysis
- Thematic analysis used to identify common themes throughout shared experiences of participants

Theme 1:

“I go to a special meeting just for moms and we can say anything there. It's the one place we have that we can really be honest about the pain and struggle specific to being a mother.... we know what it's like to put our kids, the ones that we love more than anything, through hell for a drink or a drug. I've been supported through them.”

Theme 2:

“Not everyone has kids and nobody really has kids my age, so that's really hard to feel like the other girls don't really understand what I'm going through.”

Theme 3:

“The shame would just cut like a knife...it can be a motivator but it can also be completely detrimental, just debilitating. The shame.”

Theme 4:

“Seeing my son get clean...that was amazing. We didn't think he'd ever draw a sober breath...He gives me hope. It's kind of a role reversal, I should be giving it to him, but you know.”

Findings

Four themes were identified:

Theme 1: Access to Treatment, Resources, and Support

- Participants' statements verified a lack of supportive resources available within the treatment community that address the needs specific to mothers

Theme 2: Peer Support

- Participants expressed the value of peer support while in treatment, and the emotional pain experienced when they perceived the inability of peers who don't have children to relate to their experiences

Theme 3: Feelings of Shame and Guilt

- A collection of statements communicating the shame and guilt associated with active use and the rehabilitation process, indicating how these emotions impede recovery

Theme 4: Adult Children in Recovery

- Participants' statements about their own children being in recovery from substance use showed how recovering children offer valuable emotional support to their mothers

Conclusion and Next Steps

- Results from this study support existing literature recognizing the shortage of resources and treatment facilities capable of meeting the unique needs of mothers seeking recovery from substance use disorders.
- Additional findings exposed common themes which are of intrinsic value to the future development of substance use treatment geared towards mothers. The shared experiences of participants emphasize the need for alternative treatment methods.
- Resources designed for mothers seeking treatment are scarce. In addition to logistical support, primary treatment needs of mothers include emotional and spiritual support, peer groups composed exclusively of mothers, and family involvement in recovery.
- It is the intention of the researchers for the findings of this study to be utilized by community partners in establishing additional supports for mothers in recovery in Southern Maine.

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References

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