

Jewish Family & Children's Service Ma'oz

BLOOM

In recent decades, advocates have successfully mobilized the mainstream public to destigmatize the postpartum experience including maternal mental health (MMH) issues, encouraging people to validate the problem and the need for professional intervention. The Jewish Orthodox community has remained largely insulated from this influence, which means lack of education about MMH and fear of stigma is amplified among Jewish Orthodox mothers. Further, these women have widespread concern that professional mental health services are not culturally sensitive, i.e., will interfere with religious values and beliefs, and be unhelpful.

Living in a community that holds high expectations for mothers as well as a strong commitment to privacy, Orthodox mothers often fear the consequences of making their private struggles public. They risk being shamed, labeled as pathologic, or simply experiencing public doubt about their ability. As a result, they hide rather than seek help and support. While not every parenting struggle is pathological, keeping one's challenges hidden can lead to painful personal self-doubt and self-blame. Compounding this, they are at even greater risk of experiencing MMH issues because cultural customs encourage that they have more children, beginning at a younger age than the general population, while simultaneously upholding additional communal and religious responsibilities. Having a larger family often adds additional and unique layers of complexity for the mothers. Because of their tendency for privacy, data on the problem is hard to obtain; however, we anticipate the prevalence to be equal to or greater than in the general public, which hovers at 20%. (Bennett et. al, 2004).

Bloom differs from other social change projects of this nature because it targets Orthodox women, who participate in a religious culture with a strong and specific set of norms and expectations. To successfully catalyze social change in this community, Bloom uses a grassroots approach that relies on the community's customs, such as the need for safety, privacy, and trust, to hold 1:1 awareness raising conversations and implements activities targeted at specific groups within the community, such as faith leaders and husbands, to create change from within the community itself. Bloom relies on using peer support to spark a true culture change, engaging the community in our work, and empowering women to be the ambassadors for change.

BLOOM selected 15 peer educators/BLOOM Ambassadors and delivered 15 hours of training that covered topics such as perinatal mood disorders; assessing for needs of increased care; overview of normative and problematic postpartum experiences to include feeding, sleeping, relationship, pelvic floor disorders, medical, and mood challenges; compassionate listening and validation; identifying needs; and providing helpful resources and guidance to ensure they are fit to provide peer education and support to new mothers. Every newly-delivered mother in the community received a call/visit from a Bloom Ambassador who offers support as the mother navigates the challenging transition of post-delivery. Crucially, the volunteer will discuss "taboo postpartum topics" in the community; she will normalize any struggles the mothers may be experiencing, and will empower them to advocate for their own

health and well-being, speaking up if they need more support. Through peer-to-peer conversations that raise awareness and provide access to resources while maintaining discretion and confidentiality, women have easy access to and feel safer having informal conversations about sensitive topics with peers. The BLOOM Ambassador gives the mom a BLOOM BAG, full of mom swag and a resource toolkit that contains culturally sensitive information on a multitude of topics for new mothers, such as postpartum mental health, new baby needs, physical health care, and referrals to culturally competent providers specializing in post birth complications.

JFCS' Ma'oz Program Director, Dvora Entin, LCSW, is a prominent, well-connected member of the Lower Merion community. In her role, she builds ties between JFCS and local synagogues, day schools, families, and other community groups, and is a thought leader in changing the community's understanding and perceptions of mental health challenges. These relationships have laid the groundwork for increased programming on MMH among Orthodox women of Philadelphia in a trusted, non-judgmental way. Bloom's launch was supported by local women leaders and rabbinic leadership as well as mental health professionals who had been briefed on the idea.

Initial funding was provided by Jewish Federation's Women of Vision, The Jewish Women's Foundation of Greater Philadelphia. JFCS is currently in the 10th month of the program with intent to expand the BLOOM offerings after the funding ends in August. Our findings support the need to expand therapeutic spaces to postpartum women in a way that decreases isolation and opens conversations in a safe space with those that can support them. By providing increased education around mental health and postpartum disorders, increased connection to community and support, and increased access to resources, we strengthen our response to maternal mental health.

As this program unfolded, we identified the need to engage partners and had a successful event for fathers called, "Husbands Hormones and Heroes: What your wife wants you to understand about the postpartum experience." Moderated by a male therapist, the community responded with significant interest and attendance. Bloom seeks to identify all obvious or creative ways to support newly delivered mothers!

Bloom Ambassadors collectively continue to identify community needs, motivate one another, and share ideas and tools to spark a lasting program of support. This volunteer base is inspired and motivated to create a shift in the ways that moms are supported and engaged in the Orthodox Jewish community. As our Ambassadors reach new moms, JFCS remains engaged as the resource for additional clinical support and guidance, stepping in when needs are more extreme or the family needs exceed those available from the Bloom Ambassador. With ongoing contact, we can reduce the possibility of a mom "falling through the cracks" and not knowing where to go for help and support.