

# Social Support and Online Postpartum Discussion Groups: A Content Analysis



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## Background

- Postpartum depression (PPD) is a non-psychotic depression that occurs within one year of childbirth
- Incidence of postpartum depression (PPD) ranges from 10-16% in Canadian women (Lanes, Kuk & Tamim)
- Social support has a positive influence on women's childbearing experience and peer support is shown to be a preventive factor in postpartum depression

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## Background

- 70% Canadian adults access the internet for health related information
- 30% internet users participate in health related blogs/discussion forums
- Evidence shows participation in online support groups a positive means to obtain support and information among persons managing physical and mental health related conditions

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## Purpose

- To explore the types of social supports that characterize the discussions of women who participate in PPD online support groups.



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## Method

- **Directed qualitative content analysis**
  - Emotional support (concern, affection, encouragement)
  - Informational support (giving advice; information sharing)
  - Instrumental support (practical help with daily living)
- **Online Google search** for online PPD support groups that dealt with pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum

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- **Data Collection**
  - 11 online groups identified; **one** chosen as currently active, public, written permission from moderator
  - **512** postings related to postpartum experiences, at least one sentence in length with ongoing dialogue retrieved
- **Data Analysis**
  - typology of social support (emotional, informational, instrumental) used to categorize postings
  - group consensus

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## Results of Postings

- 41.6% Emotional
- 37.5% Informational
- 20.9% Practical

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## Emotional Support

Participants were encouraging, empathic and accepting of each other

### Sub Themes

- Giving hope
- Sanctuary for Honesty
- Affection and Empathy



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*“There is a light at the end of the tunnel”*

*“My heart breaks for you. I see my own self in that fog”*

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## Informational Support

Many questioned their symptoms and asked for advice, others provided information and shared personal experiences

### Sub Themes

- Seeking Reassurance and Validation
- Peer Experts
- Treatment Advice

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*“I am imagining my thoughts will return to normal and that I will stop obsessing!!! Does anyone feel like this? I know it is silly question or else we would not be on this board but, I just need some reassurance that I will be myself again. Thanks.”*

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## Instrumental Support

Women provided each other suggestions to help with daily activities, infant care and self-care

*“...Set your baby down in a safe place and walk away for a few minutes .... You have to eat. Try to eat foods or meals you usually enjoy. Also, try to take time to relax. Is there anyone helping you with the baby?”*

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### Discussion

- Participants 'cared' for each other
- A safe place to reveal negative thoughts and feelings about motherhood
- Provides relief, comfort and hope
- Peer support occurs primarily without provision of instrumental support

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### Discussion

- The role of "expert" evident
- Use of personal stories and information
- Contrary to legitimate concerns participants showed health enhancing behaviours

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### Implications

- Further research to determine if online networking is associated with adverse outcomes for women
- Questions emerge around credibility of online social groups
- Need to explore the role of peer led social support groups versus health professional moderators

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Conversation  
&  
Questions



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