

Exploring Mental Health and Wellness for Mothers in Higher Education

I. Project Description

A. Background and Description of Project

Maternal mental health includes the periods before, during, and after birth (perinatal health) in connection with the mother's experiences and mental health outcomes (Redshaw & Wynter, 2022). According to Blount et al (2021) integrating psychological and social factors when considering perinatal health is crucial as women's health is multifaceted and can aid neonatal outcomes. During the perinatal period, women are predisposed to a variety of psychological changes such as anxiety, tiredness, depression, mood fluctuations, and excitement (Blount et al., 2021). In addition, mental wellness can play a vital role for women in the perinatal period. Such examples consist of higher mortality rates among women of color, specifically Black women compared to White or Hispanic women (Blount et al., 2021). Also known as the weathering phenomenon or transgenerational trauma; experiences that span generations, with passing on that experienced trauma or coping mechanisms to their children. Thus, understanding maternal mental health is important to recognize its impact on the wellness and outcomes of mothers.

Augustine et al (2018) found that mothers in college were more likely to be single, younger, and have fewer children. They also reported lower levels of happiness and increased fatigue. Most importantly, these mothers reported lower levels of self-care because of time constraints. Nichols et al (2015) describe self-care as what someone does to contribute to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Researchers found that Black women are often faced with intensive mothering pressures and compete with the image of a "strong black woman" (Nichols et al., 2015; Parker, 2021). This means that the Black mother is capable of doing it all; being a mother, moneymaker, and a backbone for the family. Similarly, Latinas are influenced to abide by their traditional cultural roles as caregivers and are therefore criticized when disrupting these norms; leading to maternal guilt (Montano et al., 2023). All while leaving their well-being behind.

Nonetheless, Barkin & Wisner (2013) found that mothers did not participate in self-care the following months after giving birth. The results also indicated that mothers recognize the importance of self-care yet face barriers such as time, and limited resources (e.g. spending all their finances on children) and have difficulty asking for help. As shown, mothers are held up to extremely high expectations, yet they are expected to maintain their well-being and complete educational achievements. One in every four college students in the U.S. identify as a parent and 76% are women (Augustine et al., 2018). In addition to being students, these women must balance the demands of caring for their child or children. As a result of these time constraints and lack of available resources, mothers are failing to complete their degrees and ultimately drop out of college (Miller et al., 2011).

Yet, there has been a gap in understanding how to better serve mothers in college and aid in their well-being. Maternal mental health has often been studied in the period before or right after childbirth. However, mental health challenges can persist after these periods because of environmental barriers (Barkin & Wisner, 2013; Radey & McWey, 2021), sociological challenges such as societal standards of mothering (Lamar & Forbes, 2020), and hormonal/biological changes (Blount et al., 2021). Lamar & Forbes (2024), assessed stress, anxiety, and depression in their sample of mothers but found no significant results across demographics such as race, ethnicity, education level, and income. When assessing wellness, Sansone et al (2024), found that the Prenatal Mindfulness Relationship-Based Program did help mothers become more present and increase self-awareness; however, the study was limited as it only had 13 participants.

Therefore, the goal of the proposed study is to analyze the relationship between wellness and maternal mental health, based on the presence of self-care during the postnatal. Researchers will also assess whether additional stressors (financial or limited resources) affect participation in self-care and how this compares to single mothers and mothers with partners. The research questions are as follows:

Aim 1: How does the relationship between maternal mental health and wellness change? Do tendencies of wellness increase or decrease throughout this period?

Aim 2: What obstacles keep mothers from practicing wellness, and what are the consequences? Does it lead to a decrease or increase in wellness?

Aim 3: Considering the factors above how do wellness and self-care differ between mothers with active partners and single mothers? Are there stressors specifically affecting single mothers and not mothers with partners?

B. Methodology

Participants will be required to be 19 years old or above. The total sample size will consist of about 50-100 young adults. The recruitment process entails sharing flyers around the UNO campus and giving participants incentives to sign up. In addition, the online survey will be created and made available via a Qualtrics link and to the UNO Department of Psychology Research Participation System (SONA). The questionnaire will require participants to answer demographics (age, gender, partner status, race/ethnicity, number of children) and their perceived daily stresses using the 18-item Daily Hassles Scale which encompasses five facets: financial, physical, relational, environmental, and professional (Udayar et al., 2023). Researchers believe that by using this comprehensive scale, data will be sufficient to answer a variety of stressors that may impact the mother's wellness and mental health.

In addition, to measure wellness participants will fill out the 5F-WEL Inventory. This measure covers five factors: creative self, coping self, social self, essential self, and physical self. The five factors encompass different aspects of self-care and take into consideration the flexibility in the term “self-care”. Moreover, to measure the current state of the mother's mental health, participants will answer the 5-Item Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS-Dep-5) which is based on Harel et al (2021). Data will be analyzed in SPSS using correlations to indicate relationships between the variables. In addition, there will be an independent sample t-test to compare wellness scores between single mothers and mothers with partners and mothers experiencing high levels of stress and low levels of stress.

C. Project Timeline

Mar-Apr	Online survey development will be conducted during this time.
May	Preparation and submission of IRB protocol
Jun-Aug	Recruitment and data collection: this timeframe will consist of monitoring SONA and incoming data.
Sept-Oct	Data analysis and organization
Nov-Dec	Preparation for poster presentation for the UNO Research and Creativity Fair.

D. Student/Faculty Mentor Roles

My role consists of being the student researcher. My responsibilities are to help create the online survey, familiarize myself and assist in completing the IRB, manage data collection and analysis, and make the presentation. Dr. Bjornsen-Ramig will supervise the survey's development and ensure that data collection runs smoothly, and analysis is accurate.

II. Budget Justification

The student stipend is requested to be \$1,500. This amount will provide a salary for the student researcher throughout the project. I, the student researcher, plan to work on this project 3-4 hours per week based on an hourly rate of around \$10.71/ hour. The tasks include:

- Survey development and organization
- IRB preparation, writing, revision, and submission
- Recruiting participants and overseeing data collection
- Data analysis and organization
- Poster preparation and presentation

The rest of the grant will be dedicated towards supplies and recruitment required to complete the project.

Student Stipend	\$1,500
Assessment and flyer supplies	\$500
Participant recruitment incentives	\$500
Total FUSE	\$2,500

III. References

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DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING

December 6, 2024

Dear Members of the FUSE Committee:

It is with enthusiasm that I write this letter of support for Daniela Martha-Palma's application for the FUSE grant for her project, *"Exploring mental health and wellness of mothers in higher education"*. As Daniela's mentor, I am impressed with her curiosity, work ethic, and ability to engage with complex research questions.

Daniela's proposed research focuses on maternal mental health. This project is innovative and timely, addressing a gap in understanding the unique mental health challenges of mothers enrolled in higher education. Daniela has already shown impressive initiative in developing a well-defined research plan that incorporates quantitative methodology, snowball sampling of participants, and a variety of assessment tools including the Five Factor Wellness Inventory. Daniela is bilingual in English and Spanish, which will facilitate her in recruiting and studying a diverse sample. Her double-major in Psychology and Latino Studies provides her with a strong academic foundation from which to execute this proposed project.

During our work together, Daniela, a first-generation Latina student and Goodrich Scholar, has demonstrated the skills and dedication required for rigorous academic research. For example, her skills with reviewing and consolidating current literature, as well as her aptitude with quality scholarly writing have already emerged at this early stage of her project. Her ability to synthesize complex information and approach challenges with creativity and persistence sets her apart from her peers.

As a mentor, I will actively support Daniela throughout the project by providing regular guidance, feedback, and access to necessary resources. This includes regular meetings to discuss progress, troubleshooting challenges, and assisting with data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. To ensure the success of the project, Daniela will have access to confidential space in the UNO Community Counseling Clinic as needed to collect data, as well as consultation with one of my esteemed colleagues, Dr. Ashley Blount, who will serve as an additional mentor on this proposed project, particularly as it relates to quantitative data analysis.

I am confident that Daniela is well-prepared to execute this research. The budget and project timeline she has offered are feasible within the parameters set forth by ORCA, and I fully support her application for the FUSE grant. This funding will not only enable her to complete her ambitious project but also help her build a strong foundation for her future academic and professional pursuits, which include pursuing graduate study in counseling. Please do not hesitate to contact me at abjornsen@unomaha.edu if you require additional information or have further questions.

Sincerely,



Abby Bjornsen-Ramig, Ph.D.
Professor, UNO Department of Counseling