



Evoking Solutions to Maternal Self-Harm and Mortality

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Introduction

The arts evoke many emotions. Can a controversial film evoke an important conversation about parenthood and mental health or contribute to a public health crisis already affecting one in five expectant or new parents⁵?

Media and Perinatal Mental Health

Dramatic depictions of death by suicide are common in film¹. In the 2021 theatrical release and recent release to streaming services, *A Mouth Full of Air*, Amanda Seyfried plays Julie, a blissful and creative new mom who is progressively besieged by postpartum depression². The film's trailer suggests a story of a struggling mom, supported by a loving husband and family, finding her way to recovery. The trailer's first audible line is **"You made it,"** reinforcing the suggestion of a happy ending. The emotionally soothing voiceover shares a metaphor, **"Sometimes the stars (i.e., for casting wishes, reasons for living) are blocked by the clouds (i.e., symptoms); but, even if you don't see them, they're always there (i.e., supports, recovery, joy)."** By contrast, the film's finale is a devastating suicide. The even more evocative ending to the novel depicts simultaneous matricide and suicide³.

While Postpartum Depression is the best known, researchers see it as one of a cluster of mental health conditions with birth-related prevalence spikes referred to as Perinatal Mental Health Disorders or PMHDs⁴. PMHDs affect around 20% of pregnant and postpartum women⁴, with an even higher prevalence for mothers of color and among those parenting in poverty⁵. Mental disorders account for 11% of maternal mortality (e.g., suicide or

overdose) and are presumed 100% preventable⁶. Unaddressed, these disorders result in high societal costs⁷ and the impact on children is decades-long burdens such as developmental problems and psychopathology⁸.

More than 60 films have included characters with a PMHD⁹. For the first time, a PMHD afflicted father was recently portrayed for the first time in *Daddy Blues*¹⁰, an acknowledgment that both parents have increased risk of developing a PMHD⁹. For those personally touched by birth related trauma or mental health difficulties, *A Mouth Full of Air's* depiction of persistent desperation, self-harm, and death are likely to be "triggering" or result in a flood of painful thoughts, memories and emotions. It may be especially difficult in our culture, which mostly sweeps mental health issues behind the mythical white picket fence we associate with parenthood.

Two Critical Priorities

1. Media creators have a responsibility to include crisis service resources when characters are, by common sense, likely to evoke or incite viewers' thoughts of self-harm, suicide or harm to others. When depicting teen suicide in *13 Reasons Why*¹⁰ Netflix had actors break from character to inform the audience of the show's triggering content. Crisis-line resources were frequently displayed. While a sensible start, this approach alone is inadequate to mitigate the risk; the series release still resulted in increased prevalence of teen suicide attempts and deaths¹¹.

2. Make perinatal mental health screening universal and prioritize funding for treatment and resources. Evidence

shows benefit from “screening” or asking mothers (and likely fathers) about the degree to which she/ he recently experienced symptoms¹². Obstetric, pediatric, and primary care visits provide points for screening. Effective treatments are available, and many include the father / partner and the baby¹³. Needed are ongoing, coordinated public health investments to ensure professionals are trained to screen parents and ensure links to treatments. A paucity of perinatally trained clinicians needs to be addressed^{14,15}. The current patch-quilt of limited resources and services is, for everyone, falling short on this clear and addressable problem.

If you or someone you know is struggling with a PMAD, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts please help them link to local professional supports and/or national crisis services.

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