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Is Breastfeeding Only Good for Babies?

Does the Mother Get Anything Out of It?

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Editorial

A colleague recently sent me an op-ed from *The Washington Post* written by a group of mental health professionals who had had horrid personal breastfeeding experiences and concluded that breastfeeding was too hard and didn't make that much of a difference any way. Now they encourage all the mothers in their practice to wean. Think about that. How many women have needlessly been told to wean because of these women's negative experiences? Unfortunately, it's another example of an anecdote being used as evidence. Their experience was bad, so they generalize that for everyone, and it has impacted thousands of women.

The underlying assumption is that there is no benefit for mothers when they breastfeed. It's something I've heard in mental health circles for years—and it's absolutely wrong! In terms of survival of the species, it doesn't make sense that breastfeeding would only benefit the baby. Mothers may not be inclined to do something that does not benefit them, and that wouldn't be good for the baby. So it makes sense, in terms of survival, that mothers and babies both get something out of breastfeeding. The benefits for mothers have been described in detail elsewhere, but here's a quick summary of some of the big ones.

1. During pregnancy, mothers enter a temporary state of metabolic syndrome (insulin resistance, higher triglycerides and lipids, more visceral fat), which is necessary to sustain a pregnancy. During the postpartum period, breastfeeding resets the mother's metabolism to prepregnancy levels and turns off the symptoms of metabolic syndrome. Otherwise, these symptoms continue into the postpartum period and beyond, eventually resulting in higher risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease—the number one killer of women in the United States (Stuebe & Rich-Edwards, 2009). This is why you see significantly lower rates of diabetes and heart disease in older women who have breastfed for at least 12 months (Schwartz et al., 2009; Stuebe, Rich-Edwards, Willett, Manson, & Michels, 2005). Lowering risk for these debilitating, possibly fatal diseases, is benefit enough. But breastfeeding's physiological effects for mothers are even more extensive.
2. The human stress response involves three main components: catecholamine (fight-or-flight response), hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (where we get

the stress hormone, cortisol), and the inflammatory response system (Kendall-Tackett, 2007). In response to physical or psychological threat, all three of these systems engage. The stress response is meant to be short-term. Unfortunately, chronic stress can keep this system on all the time, and when it is, mothers are at risk for depression and a wide range of health problems. So here's the good news. Exclusive breastfeeding actually turns off the stress response (Groer & Kendall-Tackett, 2011). It's one way that breastfeeding protects against cardiovascular disease. In addition, exclusive breastfeeding protects maternal mental health because it lowers the inflammatory response, and studies have consistently shown that exclusively breastfeeding mothers are at lower risk of depression. That does not mean that an exclusively breastfeeding mother won't get depressed. It means that her risk is lower, and if she does get depressed, breastfeeding will help her cope.

3. Exclusive breastfeeding increases both the quality and quantity of mothers' sleep. Many assume (as I once did) that breastfeeding mothers get less sleep. Not true. We've now had several large studies showing that exclusively breastfeeding mothers report longer sleep times and feeling better and more energetic during the day (Dørheim, Bondevik, Eberhard-Gran, & Bjorvatn, 2009a; Kendall-Tackett, Cong, & Hale, 2011). The number of hours that mothers report that they sleep predicts depression (women who report more hours of sleep have lower rates; Dørheim, Bondevik, Eberhard-Gran, & Bjorvatn, 2009b). Moreover, if mothers sleep well, they are better able to cope with the demands of new motherhood, so even if they do get depressed, they are likely to recover more quickly.
4. Finally, breastfeeding increases mothers' sense of well-being. When breastfeeding is going well, oxytocin is upregulated. That is the general feel-good hormone. It makes us want to be around other people and do things for them. It helps us cope with some of the not-too-fun tasks of motherhood. Breastfeeding helps mothers overcome past trauma and not pass it along to their children (Kendall-Tackett, Cong, & Hale, 2013; Strathearn, Mamun, Najman, & O'Callaghan, 2009). It's a chance for

mothers to make a fresh start and learn to parent differently than they were parented. For many mothers, this may be the most important reason of all to breastfeed.

All of the benefits I've described happen if breastfeeding is going well. But what if it isn't? Then there can be problems. The women who wrote *The Washington Post* article described some pretty grim experiences. One of the women pumped constantly and wishes she had thrown away the pump and spent more time with her baby. I had to wonder why she was pumping so furiously, especially because she described the later heartbreak of having to throw all her milk away. Why dump it? And why stockpile so much? I wish someone could have told her that it didn't need to be that way. Not using her pump so much may have been a good idea. Similarly, her colleague described weeks of shredded nipples and toe-curling pain. Again, why? Think how much better things would have been if she had had good lactation support.

So once again, the criticism about breastfeeding really points to a lack of support for new mothers rather than problems with breastfeeding per se. If we continue to treat mothers so badly and expect them to fend for themselves, they may turn around and blame breastfeeding for their troubles rather than seeing the bigger picture, namely, why did they have to do it all alone?

Supporting new mothers means fewer breastfeeding problems. And if we have fewer breastfeeding problems, mothers benefit, babies benefit, and there may be less backlash against breastfeeding. Supporting new mothers is work worth doing.

Thanks for all you do to help mothers have a positive breastfeeding experience. Each life you touch can possibly influence thousands.

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