

Exploring the role of interoceptive awareness in breastfeeding

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Introduction

60% of parents end breastfeeding earlier than intended (Rosenbaum et al., 2020).

Breastfeeding self-efficacy reliably predicts feeding cessation - those with higher self-efficacy breastfeed for longer (Blyth et al., 2008).

Interoceptive awareness (IA) might also be important for successful breastfeeding - parental distraction during nursing was associated with reduced milk output (Newton & Newton, 1948), but studies are scarce.

Does interoceptive awareness predict breastfeeding self-efficacy?

What sensations do parents experience when feeding?

Methods

Online survey of breastfeeding parents, N=253, UK based, mean age 34.52 (SD = 4.78, range 22-49), breastfeeding from 0-105 months (mean = 18.01, SD=17.99)

Likert scale measures:

BFSE - breastfeeding self-efficacy (Dennis et al., 2003)

MAIA2 - Multidimensional interoceptive awareness scale (Mehling et al., 2018)

BFIA - Novel measure of breastfeeding interoceptive awareness:

I notice how my body feels during breastfeeding

Whilst I am breastfeeding I can pay my full attention to it

I am able to detect my let-down reflex

Qualitative question, free text response -

'Please describe in as much detail as possible how your body feels during breastfeeding'

Results

No correlation between BFIA & Time breastfeeding: $r(251) = -.028$ $p = .663$

BFSE was predicted by:

Time breastfeeding (months), $B = .16(.03)$, $p < .001$

BFIA, $B = 1.77(.49)$, $p < .001$

But not MAIA2

Three main categories of physical sensation were identified (Figure 1). Participants discussed strategies for managing sensations (implying IA), the combining of physical and psychological experiences, and noted sensations were unexpected or 'strange'. Most participants experiences changed over time:

'I think it's a dynamic journey'



Fig. 1 Example quotes representing the three main categories of physical sensation identified.

Summary

BF specific IA may be important for BF success and confidence - the BFIA should be further developed and explored, and IA should be considered a potential tool for BF support.

Physical and emotional experiences of BF are complex, and not linear - this is important for setting parents expectations around feeding:

'Breastfeeding feels different at different times, from relaxing to irritating.'

'My journey has been lots of highs and lows and I would describe it as a love/hate experience.'

Many are already successfully using interoception based strategies to manage bodily sensations - this should be explored further for BF education and support.

References

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