

Becoming a parent changes our brains

Embracing “matrescence” can reshape how we care for caregivers

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When I first became a mother, I was ashamed by how bewildering and discombobulating I found it. Like around 17% of new mothers across the world (Wang et al., 2021), I was diagnosed with post-natal depression. Then, about nine months into motherhood, I discovered a word that I found utterly transformative. The word was “matrescence”.

Matrescence simply means the process of becoming a mother. It’s pronounced like the word “adolescence” – and the meaning is similar, too. For, apart from adolescence, there is no other time in a person’s life course which entails such dramatic physical, psychological and social change.

I came to believe that this word, coined by the late anthropologist Dana Raphael in the 1970s, has powerful and radical potential to transform the way we as a society consider maternal health and the needs of babies and children in their earliest years. The concept of matrescence influenced my thinking so much that I wrote a book about it – called, well, [*Matrescence* \(2023\)](#).

Motherhood can be overwhelming

I was overjoyed to be pregnant, and elated when our daughter was born, but I was also bowled over by how different I felt. I had thought that pregnancy was a one-time, transient, purely physical event, and that I would return to myself when she was born. I had

thought I would mother intensely for nine months of maternity leave and then go back to work as normal.

I had expected parenthood to be tiring and challenging, of course, but I was overwhelmed by how difficult it often felt to meet my baby’s needs while also meeting some semblance of my own basic needs. No wonder the likelihood of depressive episodes doubles during this period, compared with other times in a woman’s life (Wang et al., 2021).

I live in England, where the institution of motherhood is intensive and mostly isolated and nothing like the collective caregiving networks within which we evolved. I see new mothers around me suffering from loneliness, burnout and chronic stress – perhaps reflecting how we prize ideals of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, in a culture that puts financial interests before cooperation and people’s wellbeing.

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When I first read about matrescence, my shoulders dropped for the first time in months. I finally realised that there wasn’t anything wrong with me: I was going through a major life transition. I learned



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that mothers in matrescence experience a whole spectrum of emotions – joy, yes, but also worry, guilt, grief, frustration, fear and anger.

I had internalised the idea that I must “enjoy every minute” of my new mothering life. But while I was deeply grateful for my daughter, the social and cultural norms around me seemed to flatten the emotional and existential experience. Any expression of discomfort was seen as a failure. This sense of failure is widespread, I learned through my research. It leads to shame, which leads to silence, which can lead to isolation, which can lead to ill health and reduced wellbeing.

Caregiving changes your brain

In the process of writing my book, I got an opportunity to explore how other societies honour motherhood with rites and rituals that centre care for the mother. In the immediate post-natal period, these can include nutrient-rich meals, special drinks,

massages and herbal baths. Such traditions chime with the new science of motherhood, which reminds us of what more individualistic societies have forgotten – that new mothers as well as their babies are vulnerable and need support.

In a [landmark study](#) published in *Nature* in 2016, researchers led by neuroscientists Elseline Hoekzema and Erika Barba-Müller provided evidence for the first time that pregnancy renders pronounced, consistent changes in brain structure. Indeed, early research is also showing that caregiver brains experience significant plasticity even without the experience of pregnancy. Hands-on caring shapes brain circuitry and causes other biological changes.

The changes the brain undergoes during pregnancy have been underestimated, Hoekzema told me, “as hormones and their impact often are, and thought of as something akin to an extreme menstrual period, while this is of course on a completely different scale.” I had no idea before my own matrescence

that my brain would literally change shape. Nor that the plasticity of the brain in this period, through pregnancy particularly, can make the brain more vulnerable.

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The more attention we pay to the physiological, endocrine and neural changes wrought by pregnancy, early parenthood, and caregiving in general, the more we will understand how these processes can trigger psychological distress and even mental illness and how we can improve postpartum care.

Rediscovering our interconnectedness

Many women I interviewed for my research felt isolated and even abandoned by society in early motherhood, which affected their mental health. Since publishing the book, I have received hundreds

of messages from women blindsided by early motherhood but relieved by the idea of matrescence. Readers have called it “life-changing”, “intensely healing” and “validating”. One wrote that it has “transformed my motherhood third time round and for the better”. Another, who had severe post-natal depression, said that “everything felt like it clicked for me mentally reading it”.

This concept can give us the language and understanding to have honest conversations that could have an enormous impact on the health and wellbeing of mothers, parents, and their infants. While it is critical to spread awareness of the emerging science, there is also room to go beyond the empirical and recover a sense of ritual or ceremony – to hold and acknowledge the woman in her transition, recognising our interdependence and interconnectedness.

Since my friends and I discovered the concept of matrescence, it has given us a framework to look after each other, to look out for other new mothers in our community, and to begin to unlearn self-reliance to a degree: to accept, offer and ask for help. As a society we need to remember that it is not only a baby who is born during childbirth – a mother is born, too, and she also needs to be cared for.

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References

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