Maternal Mental Health Care and the Orthodox Jewish Family: Cultural Insights

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Family With Mixed Religious Views

Four Generation Orthodox Family attending ‘baby boy circumcision-bris milah’
Typical Orthodox Boys

What does an Orthodox family look like
• Social structure
• Religious structure
• Family structure

Orthodoxy and the Media
• What do you think you know about the Orthodox Family and Orthodox based relationships?
• Intimacy?
• Spousal Relationships?
• Roles of Women?
Challenges for MMH care:

- **Fishbowl Living**
  What if “everyone” finds out

- **Shanda/Shame**
  How will it affect my marriage prospects

- **We solve problems “ourselves”**
  “They” won’t understand

Community/Cultural Challenges

- Pressure or desire to have large families
- Male religious responsibilities can overshadow family responsibilities
- Fear of being judged for life choices
- Hard to identify religious fervor vs misguided practice

I am afraid that you...

- Will judge me
- Will question why I am so strict
- Will judge my community because of the feelings I have
- Will think I am weird
- Will ask me to teach you too much (cultural specimen)
- Will not realize how small my world is and break confidentiality by accident
I am afraid that...

- My feelings mean I am ungrateful to G-D
- My emotions mean that I have sinned or am being punished for something I did
- My husband will decide to find someone else
- My community will think I am crazy
- My friends will think I am “incompetent”
- I won’t be able to live up to my own expectations
- I will disappoint my parents
- My children’s future will be ruined/impacted if I go public

The System: God, Torah and The Rabbis

- Ask Questions if something is unfamiliar to you
- Understand that if a client is resistant, it may be because your recommendation conflicts with the Torah and Rabbinical Law

Guiding Principle:
If you have met one Orthodox Jew...
You have met one Orthodox Jew.

Modern Orthodox, Ultra Orthodox, Rabbi, Rebbe

- Rabbis are revered
- Rabbis can provide inspiration and counseling
- Rabbis assist the decision making of those who request it:
  Issues including birth control, kosher, finances, modesty, education and dealings with secular law
The Role of the Rabbi in Treatment

- Identify the role of a rabbi in current family structure
- Recognize the shame!
- If something sounds extreme it just might be...
- Engagement of a Rabbi: general guidelines

Resources...
Community Support

Perinatal Loss

- Lack of grieving structure in a very structured lifestyle
- Limited forum for public grief
- Some ignorance by leadership about “best practices”
- Isolation/privacy/shame
- Limited exposure to resources
"Well son - they're orthoducks."
Paraprofessional Helpers

- Identify resources within the community
- Client may not see herself as a recipient (others are worse off than I am)
- Create a system of privacy when possible
- Engage community leaders to help support family – non professionals

Questions to Ask & Avoid

- How many children do you want to have?
- Are you finished having children?
- Why do you choose to keep having more children?
- ASK: Who do you trust in your circle?
- ASK: How does your Rabbi impact your family?
- ASK: What are the community resources that might be available to someone who is not well?

Establishing Trust with Client and Spouse

- Reinforcing confidentiality
- Assume nothing
- Reject all movie references!!
- Be open to the need for privacy even secrecy for her lifestyle
- Be cautious of the “Rabbi Spouse”
Strengths in Community

- Community support around a struggling family
- Financial assistance
- Team approach to care
- PSYCHOEDUCATION is critical!!

How Can We Work Together?

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