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Risk and protective factors for the construction of prenatal attachment in women with oncological diagnosis during pregnancy: an exploratory observational study

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Background: Prenatal attachment begins with the mental representation of the foetus and develops with the construction of an emotional bond between the mother and her unborn baby. The quality of prenatal attachment has an important influence both on the neuropsychological and emotional development of the child and subsequently on the mother-child interaction. Although only a few studies have been carried out on the psychological aspects of oncologic diagnosis during pregnancy (Vandenbroucke et al., 2016) it is possible to consider it “a challenge” for the construction of this bond (Attril, 2012) since it is linked to a loss or weakening of those factors that are necessary for women to deal positively with gestation. The aim of this study is to investigate possible risk and protective factors associated to prenatal attachment in women with oncological diagnosis during pregnancy.

Material, patients and methods: At present, 10 mothers with oncological diagnosis (9 with diagnosis of breast cancer, one with hepatic PEComa) have been enrolled.

Recruiting took place at the European Institute of Oncology and ASST Bergamo Est. Prior informed consent, women filled out questionnaires to investigate the quality and intensity of prenatal attachment, affective states such as depression, confusion and fatigue, perceived social support and the role that pregnancy has on their lives.

Results: Preliminary correlational analyses showed a negative correlation between the intensity of prenatal attachment and negative affective states, particularly depression ($r = -.846$, $p = .344$), confusion ($r = -.871$, $p = .024$) and fatigue ($r = -.947$, $p = .004$). Moreover, a positive correlation between maternal attachment quality and perceived support by their partner ($r = .804$, $p = .016$) was found. Finally, the more pregnancy is perceived as a turning point in their life, the better the quality of prenatal attachment ($r = .926$, $p = .016$).

Conclusions: These preliminary data indicate that in addition to providing medical support to these patients it will be important to consider their experiences, their psychological adaptation to pregnancy as well as the perceived social support. It will be necessary to implement research in this direction, considering possible intervening variables, in order to structure targeted interventions aimed at supporting parenthood in the prenatal and postnatal period.