



# Facets of Perinatal Mental Health

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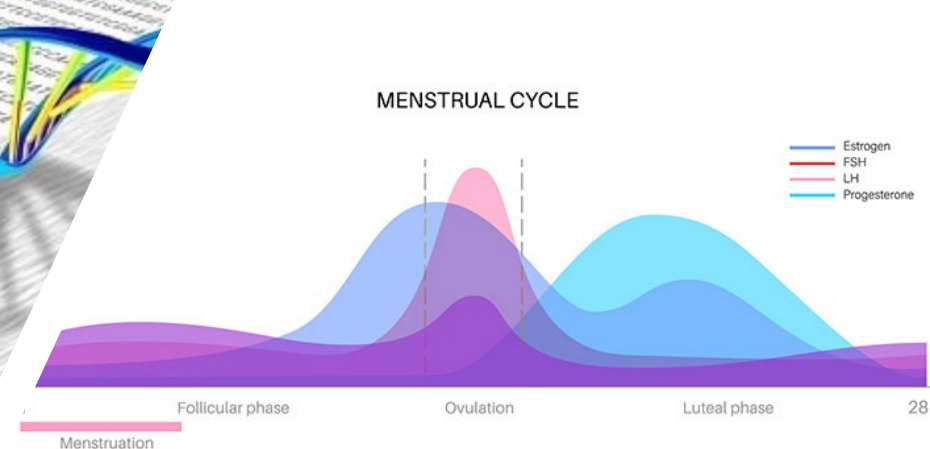
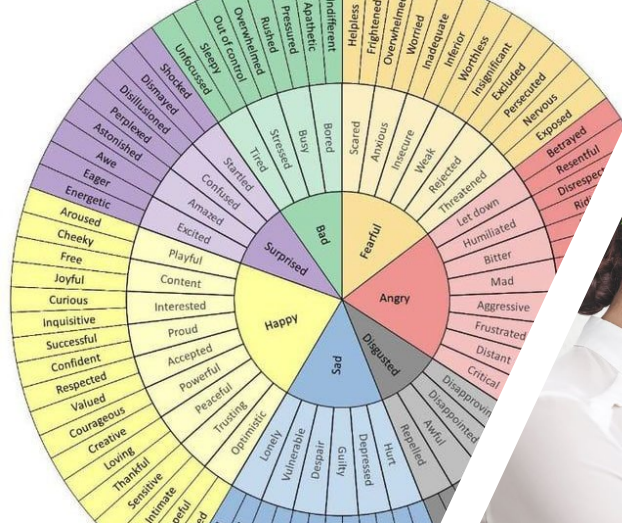
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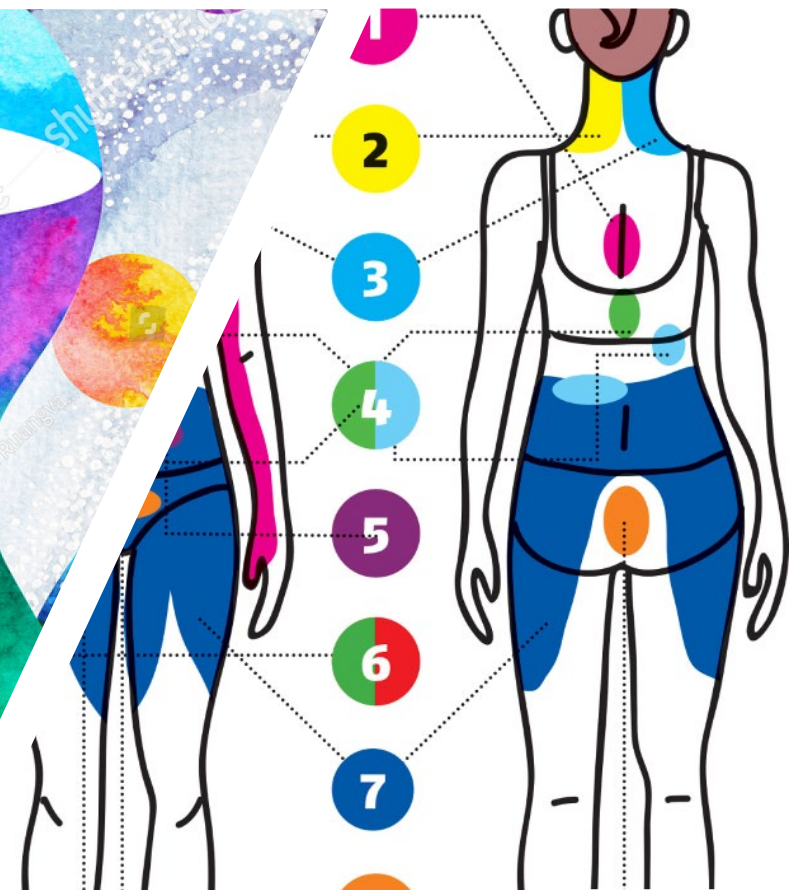


Looking at women's reproductive life experiences through the integrative lens we note that .....

- Menarche    fertility    conception    pregnancy
- Birth    postpartum    menopause



Occur in a multi-variate context .....





And - MOST  
OF ALL – in the  
interpersonal  
context....

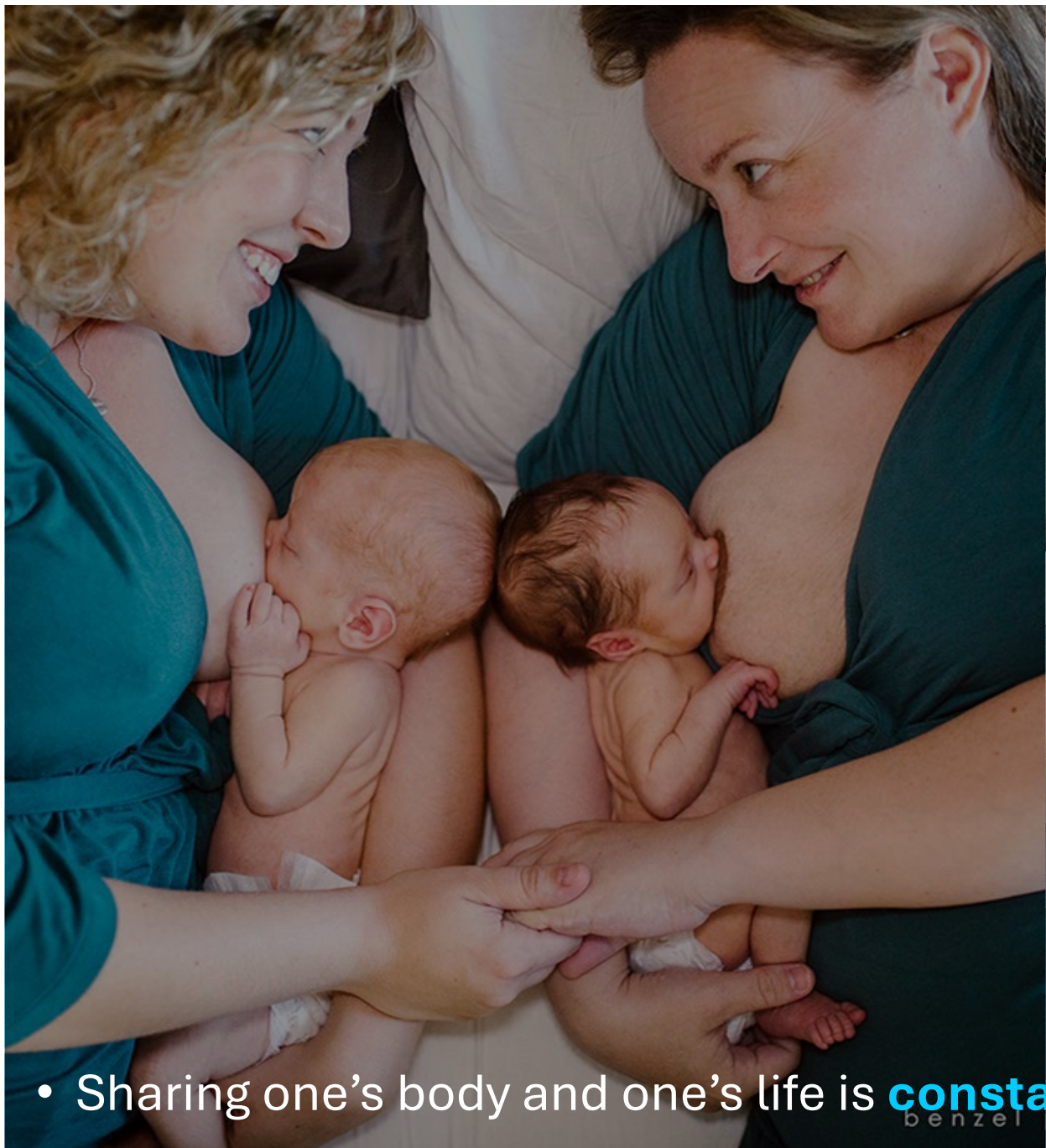
It is within the  
interpersonal  
relationships (both past  
and present) that  
perinatal mental health  
can be the most sorely  
tried, and the most  
lovingly healed



Can you imagine **anything**  
more relational than  
creating, sheltering, birthing,  
and taking responsibility for  
the life of a new individual  
with one's own body and  
soul?

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- Sharing one's body and one's life is **constantly** and **forever** directly interpersonal

New parenthood is  
replete with themes of  
identity and  
interpersonal  
relationship





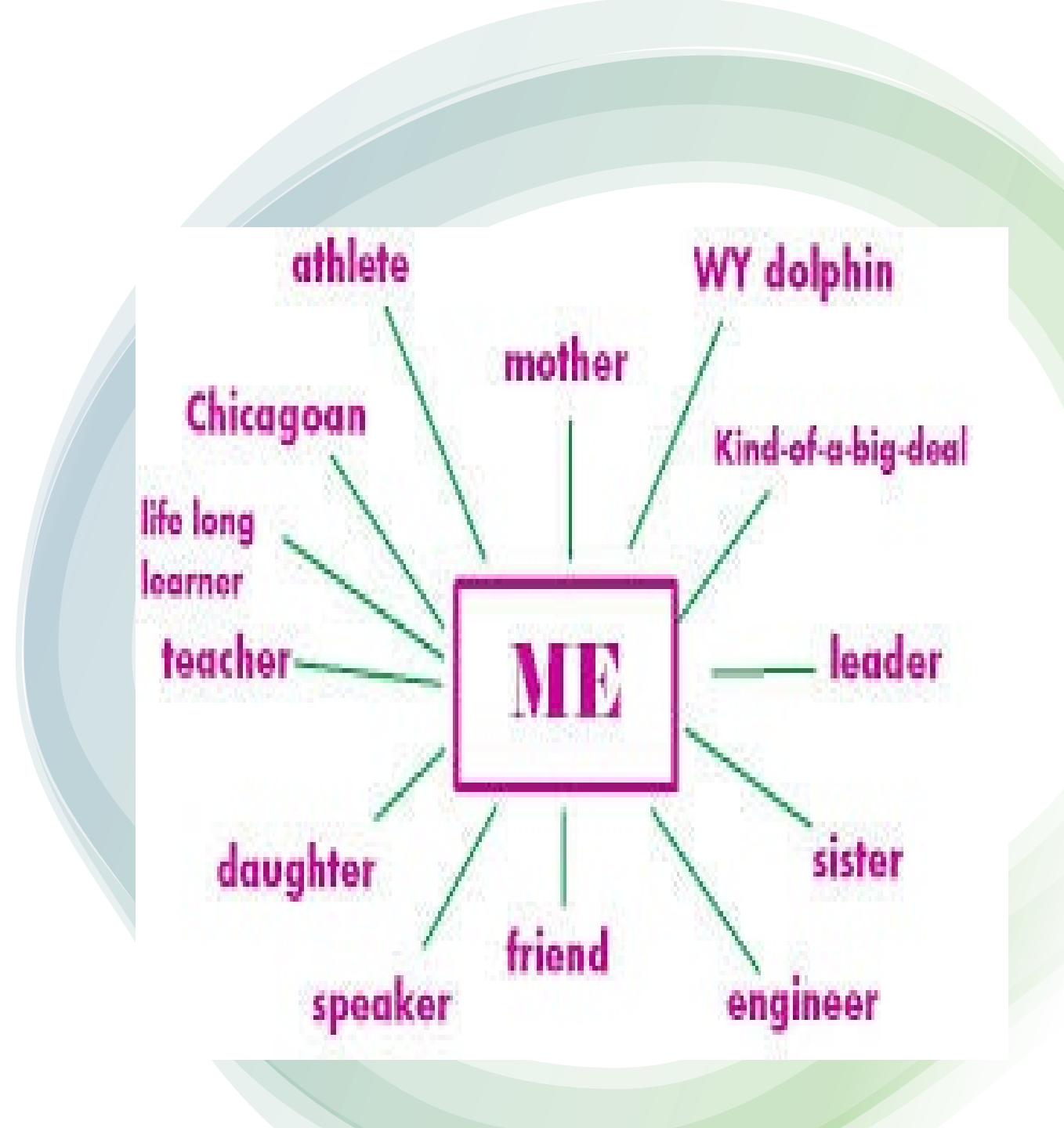
# Identity is existential

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- Every person becoming a parent for the first time experiences an existential identity crisis
- Society ignores how difficult the change in identity that accompanies becoming a parent can be
- Our task is to allow the new parental identity to become an addition, an **enrichment** – rather than something that robs us of past values and meaning

- *“Even in our increasingly egalitarian society, mothers feel the weight of parenthood’s identity shift more profoundly than fathers do; they reconceive who they are and often do so with both delight and frustration.”*

- Andrew Solomon, NYT Article, *The Secret Sadness of Pregnancy With Depression*, May 28, 2015



# Identity is also interpersonal

schema for identity formed early

formed within relationships

past relationships/their impact  
**LINGER** internally

alongside newer identities &  
interpersonal interactions

perinatal experiences influenced  
by immediate & distant past  
(stories told, images remembered,  
long-held beliefs)

and by newly offered information  
and experience

.





The **relationship changes** we experience in the perinatal period are both a reflection of and a cause of significant loss; both a contributor to and a result of adaptive change and/or PMADs.

# The perinatal time period

- officially lasts from conception to one year postpartum
- Unofficially – lasts forever- there are always things we can reflect on, learn, and share that can **STILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE**



Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMADs) are the **MOST COMMON COMPLICATION OF PREGNANCY** – it's estimated that **20%** of birthing people world-wide experience a PMAD or a combination of PMADs

Depression

Anxiety

OCD

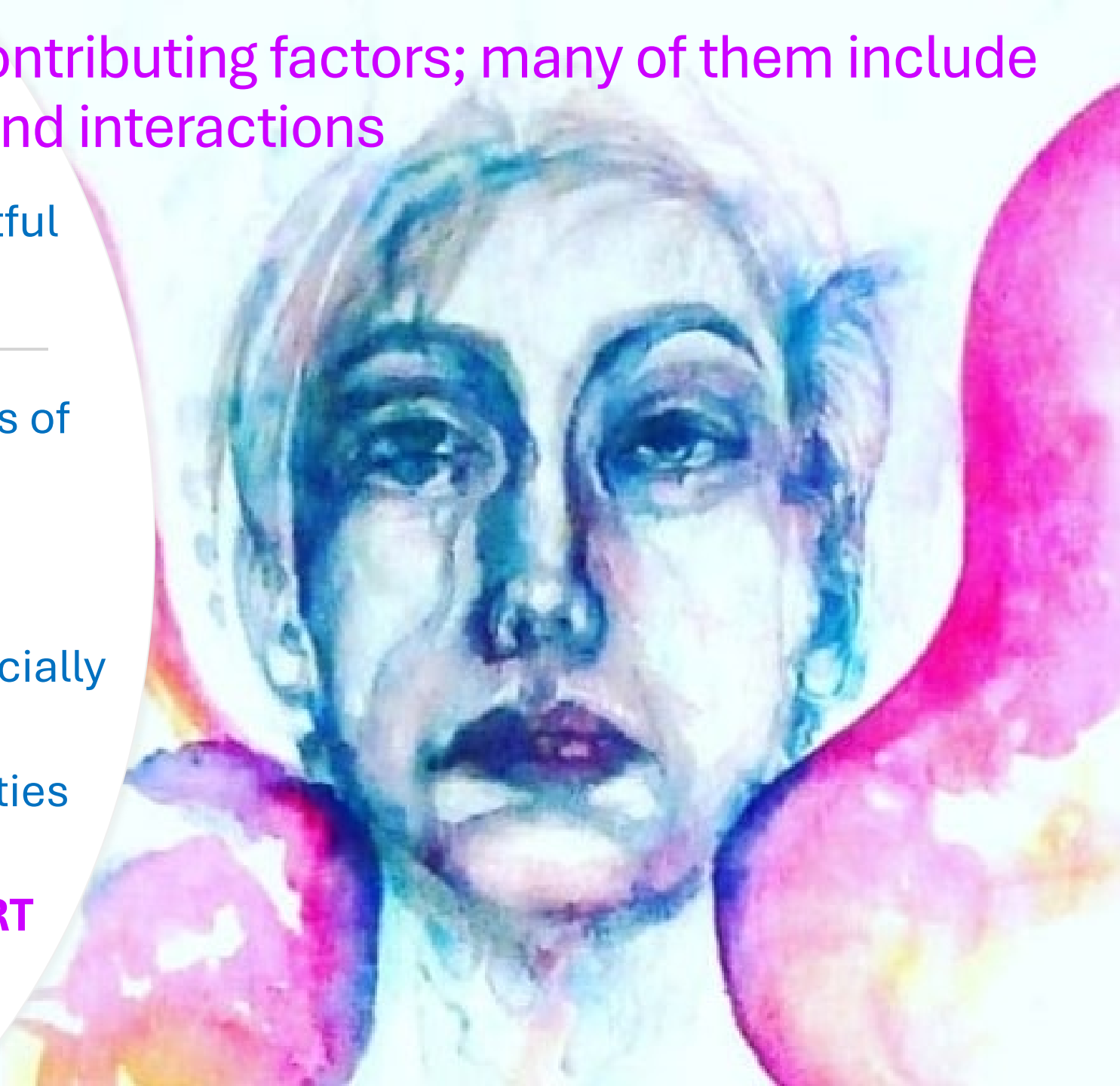
Bipolar Disorder

Psychosis

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

# PMADs have NUMEROUS contributing factors; many of them include interpersonal relationships and interactions

- History of violent, abusive, or neglectful interpersonal behavior
- Medical trauma
- History of prior pregnancy loss or loss of significant others
- Poor interpersonal treatment during pregnancy or birth
- A difficult or lengthy NICU stay (especially when the infant may not survive)
- Prior history of mental health difficulties and the associated care given
- **LACK OF INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT**





**Think about** how PMADs might result from interpersonal changes and disruptions – as well as how they may contribute to those same issues.

Very few relationships are unchanged: even the relationship to one's own mind and body are challenged



Once were competent; now are in the throes of learning many new skills

The trouble with being “an adult learner”

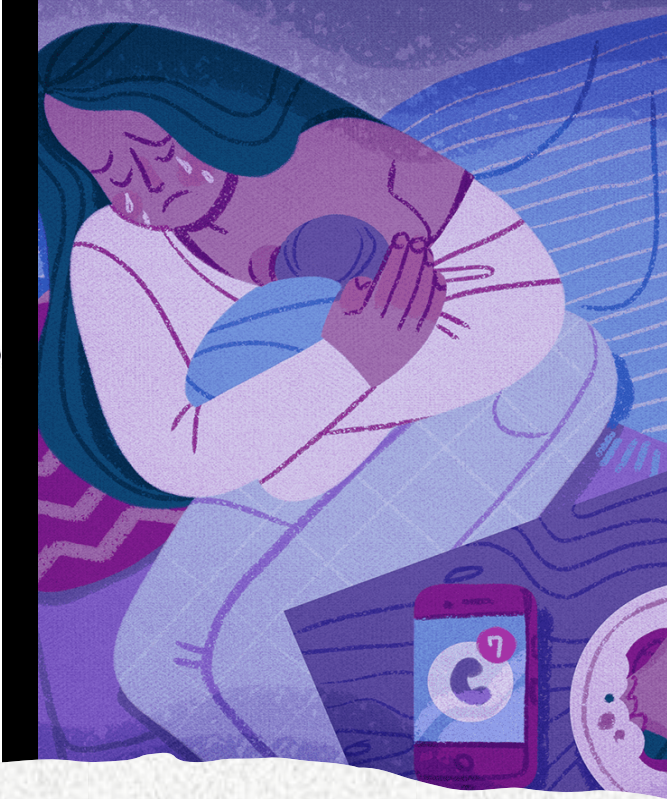
New relationship to physical body – changes of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, sleep disruption, body image

# Challenges to “role” identity

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- Relationship to child is new and encompassing ... initially replaces other roles
- What happens when the “mother” role eclipses ALL other roles?
- What happens when the old roles are falling away and the new one is not yet strongly developed?





Rage?

Panic/Anxiety?

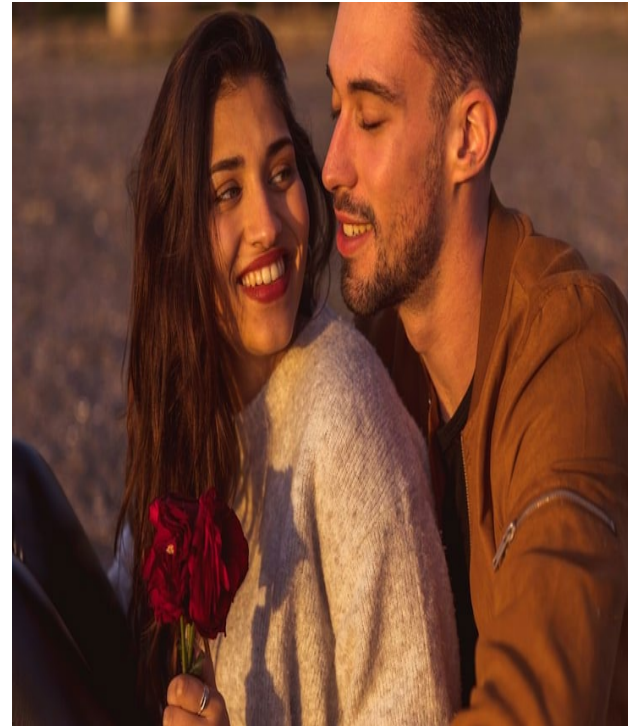
Depression?

Trying to do it all?

# Partnerships are changed .....

- Seeing partner as a parent – and being seen by them as a parent (doing it right? doing it well? respected and admired? questioned or challenged? new judgements and expectations in the couple relationship!
- Loss of “bids for connection”
- Changes in sexual connection

Going from “us two” to “we three”...who’s getting all those kisses now?



# Friendships are changed

**Old friends may depart**



**It's important to find new ones**





Family relationships are changed ... daughters become mothers; mothers become grandmothers. Somebody new is the “special girl” now.

But even more than change, we're talking about **LOSS** of relationship

- “My baby was spectacular, as they all are, but not talking to adults for hours at a time, most days of the week, was a peculiar experience. It gnawed at me. I lost social skills and confidence. I fell silent and, for a while, withdrew. I struggled to ask for, or accept, help. I didn't know how to talk about the chaos of childbirth, the effect on my body and mind – which I'm sure contributed to periods of depression and anxiety.” (Lucy Jones, the Guardian, 2024)





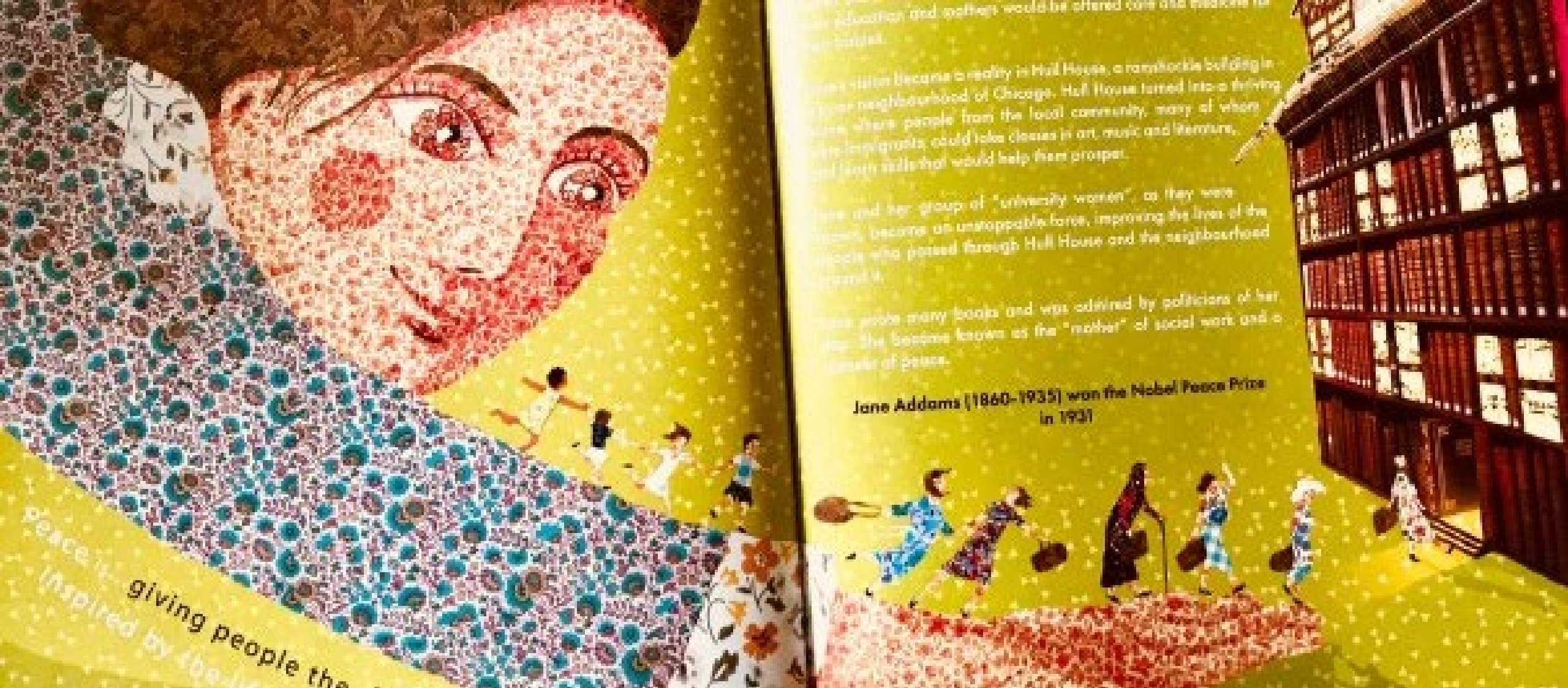
**Interpersonal isolation** is a key contributor to PMAD development

- Many of today's new mothers spend 8 or more hours per day alone with their babies
- Numerous studies suggest that loneliness is the leading component of postpartum mental health issues
- The health impact of loneliness is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day

Mothers of babies describe feelings of being socially isolated .... Research indicates numerous causes of perinatal loneliness...

- Lack of community and social network
- Lack of social recognition re: how hard it is to be a mother
- Individualistically oriented cultures
- Mismatch between expectations and realities
- Loss of interpersonal connections
- Stigma associated with breastfeeding





...education and others would be offered care and medicine for

...a vision became a reality in Hull House, a ramshackle building in  
...neighbourhood of Chicago. Hull House turned into a thriving  
...where people from the local community, many of whom  
...were immigrants, could take classes in art, music and literature,  
...and learn skills that would help them prosper.

...and her group of "university women", as they were  
...known, became an unstoppable force, improving the lives of the  
...people who passed through Hull House and the neighbourhood  
...around it.

...she wrote many books and was admired by politicians of her  
...day. She became known as the "mother" of social work and a  
...champion of peace.

Jane Addams (1860-1935) won the Nobel Peace Prize  
in 1931



How do we best prepare ourselves and others for the relational and identity changes that accompany new parenthood?

# PLAN PREPARE PREDICT REPAIR

Birth plans are great, but what is your postpartum plan?

- Three types of help
- Practice NOW
- Know your attachment style and the vulnerabilities likely to emerge in postpartum
- Learn some approaches for stress management
- Start connecting BEFORE the birth



**When changes and uncertainties occur in relationship, repairs must happen in relationship, also.**

**So.... Friends & family .... Here are your tasks**

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- **Be proactive**
- **Share your time, resources, and things you've learned**
- **Be a MENTOR**
- **Be a friend**





Thank  
you