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Relactation: A Phenomenological Approach

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RELACTATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

ABSTRACT

Background: Human breast milk is uniquely suited to the human infant's nutritional needs.

Breast milk is a live substance with immunological and anti-inflammatory properties that protect against a host of illnesses and diseases for both mothers and children.¹ Research shows that mothers without reliable perceived support, access to breastfeeding support groups, lactation specialists, or support from family may lack the confidence to breastfeed or may discontinue breastfeeding before the recommended amount of time.² Relactation is the process of re-establishing a breast milk supply that has diminished or ceased. Reasons women relactate include untimely weaning, separation of mother and infant due to premature birth or illnesses, infant is unable to tolerate artificial infant milks, or natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes.^{3,4} A mother needs access to knowledgeable healthcare professionals who can assist her with the process of relactation. She also needs to have support from family, friends, and providers that can encourage and empower her to successfully relactate.

Objective: To explore the lived experiences of women living in Montana who chose to attempt relactation.

Methods: This qualitative research study focused on describing and interpreting the lived experiences of women who attempted relactation using a phenomenological approach, which makes no assumptions about the outcome, nor guides the participant to talk about any specific aspects of their experience. To ensure this unadulterated approach, interviews were completely unstructured. Participants were encouraged to describe the experience in their own words, and to talk about the issues that were important to them. This is the basis of a true phenomenological approach. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher and assistant.

Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours in length. Eight interviews were conducted in person, in a place of the participant's choice which was usually in their home. Two were completed via telephone. A qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data.⁵ The essence of IPA lies in its analytical focus, which directs attention towards the participants' attempts to make sense of their experience. IPA is an iterative and inductive method which draws upon different processes such as line by line analysis of experiential claims, concerns, and understandings, identification of emergent patterns, coded data, participant's psychological knowledge about what it might mean to have these experiences, and the development of a structure or frame which illustrates the relationships between themes.^{5,6}

Results: An overarching theme that could have impacted the initial breastfeeding experience, and furthered the need for relactation, was having a difficult baby. Examples of being difficult included colic, latching issues, or a lack of bonding felt by the participant.

Conclusion: Participants in this study all had one thing in common- they described their babies as difficult; either with latching, nursing because of excessive crying, or difficult to care for because the maternal-child bond was absent. All participants were surprised at how difficult breastfeeding was, and rightly so; they all had non-typical breastfeeding experiences. Women need to share their experiences instead of be ashamed of them, and they might realize many others have bumps in the road to breastfeeding.

Well Established: Relactation is a process for re-establishing a breast milk supply when it has decreased or diminished. Reasons for relactation include, but aren't limited to: untimely weaning, separation of mother and infant, inability to tolerate artificial infant milks, or natural disasters.

Newly Expressed: This study provides insight into the lived experience of relactation and gives a voice to women who have attempted the process. While the general protocol for assisting a woman is well documented, this study highlights an emotional depiction of the experience described from the findings.

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