

Anxiety and physiological reactivity to cry stimuli in a community sample of primiparous women.

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The origin of anxiety disorders is both environmental and genetic in nature, with measurable physiological manifestations suggesting heightened sympathetic tone and lowered thresholds of limbic system arousal. In this cross-sectional study of expectant first-time mothers, we assessed relations among self-reported anxiety and emotion as well as physiological responses to a salient stimulus - videoclips of infant crying.

Sixty pregnant women were recruited from childbirth classes (age  $32.6 \pm 4.4$  years, length of marriage  $3.2 \pm 1.9$  years) and completed the Brief Symptom Inventory. All participants viewed a videotape with four 3-minute videoclip epochs: baseline (seascape), a 'simple' cry (sound of an infant crying), a 'complex' cry (mother/infant separation and sound of infant crying), and recovery (seascape). During the viewing, psychophysiological data were recorded continuously.

Women with higher scores on Interpersonal Sensitivity and Anxiety scales had greater increases in skin conductance to the 'simple' cry ( $r = .31$  and  $.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the 'complex' cry ( $r = .42$  and  $.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Women with higher scores on the Phobic Anxiety scale showed greater increases in skin conductance to the 'complex' cry ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and larger increases in tidal volume and respiratory period in response to the 'simple' cry ( $r$ 's =  $.41$  and  $.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

We conclude that some expectant mothers who report high trait anxiety also demonstrate physiological arousal when observing and listening to infants crying. Such findings suggest that these women are at higher risk for postpartum internalizing disorders, especially anxiety, and for difficulties in parenting their developing infants.