Baby Blues and More

Recognizing and coping with postpartum mood disorders

For most women, the arrival of a baby is like no other experience in life. Exhilaration, joy, anxiety, confusion, love, and fear are some of the emotions women and their partners feel after the birth of their baby. If this is your first baby, your world will be transformed as it never has been before. Even if you have children, the birth of each new baby brings many emotions and adjustments for the family.

In the months before your baby is born, most of the focus is on you, your changing body and your baby growing inside of you. You and your partner may spend hours planning for your labor and birth. You may notice new mothers and fathers with their babies and dream of yourself being a parent someday soon.

Knowing About This in Advance Can Help

What most women and their partners don’t know is that for some, the love and happy emotions may be overshadowed by feelings of despair such as sadness, fear, anxiety, and being overwhelmed.

Many health professionals and childbirth educators gloss over the signs and symptoms of postpartum adjustment problems so as not to scare prospective parents. But the facts tell us that 50 to 80% of new parents have baby blues, and 20% of new mothers experience a more serious form
of postpartum mood disorder. Women with a prior history of anxiety, depression, or other mood disorders are at higher risk for developing postpartum mood disorders.

The more knowledge you and your partner have about postpartum adjustment before you have your baby, the better you will be able to recognize when something doesn’t feel right. The best thing you can do for yourself is to speak up and share your concerns with someone you trust and who can get you help, particularly your partner, doctor, midwife, nurse, or social worker. Confiding in a close friend can also help you to get the support you need. Holding in frightening or negative thoughts and feelings may lead to a more serious situation.

Baby blues and other postpartum mood problems that may require more attention are discussed in the following pages. Your provider is the best person to listen to your symptoms and determine what condition you may have and how best to treat it. Most important, postpartum mood disorders are treatable and with help, you will soon feel better.

**Baby Blues**

Baby blues affect about 50 to 80% of new mothers and can occur anytime from birth through the first 2 weeks. This common condition is not considered a postpartum adjustment disorder. Baby blues are mostly brought on by the abrupt change in the mother’s hormones and her vulnerability as a new parent with a baby who is completely dependent on her. The symptoms may include mood swings, crying, trouble concentrating, difficulty sleeping, fatigue, and not eating. They may last a few hours or as long as 2 weeks. With good physical care, strong emotional support, and knowledge about this condition, these symptoms usually subside.

*If after 2 weeks from your baby’s birth your symptoms continue or increase, it may indicate something more serious and your provider should be called.*
Postpartum Depression

Postpartum depression is a more serious postpartum condition with a group of symptoms. It can start anytime after delivery, but most typically occurs from 2 weeks up to 1 year postpartum. This and some of the other disorders can affect 20% of new parents, including fathers and adoptive parents. If you are worried that you or someone you know may have a postpartum mood disorder, call your health care provider or a mental health specialist.

The most common description by women with postpartum depression is “feeling overwhelmed.” Women may have low energy and depression symptoms, or they may be hyperactive and irritable. In addition to the signs of baby blues, women suffering from postpartum depression may make statements like:

- I can’t shake feeling depressed, no matter what I do.
- I cry at least once a day and sometimes I can’t stop.
- I feel sad most or all of the time.
- I can’t concentrate.
- I don’t enjoy the things I used to enjoy.
- I have frightening thoughts about the baby or other family members.
- I can’t sleep, even when my baby sleeps.
- I feel like a failure all of the time.
- I have no energy; I feel tired all of the time.
- I have no appetite and no enjoyment of food; or, I am having sugar and carbohydrate cravings and compulsively eating all the time.
- I can’t remember the last time I laughed.
- Every little thing gets on my nerves lately. I am even furious with my baby. I am often angry with my partner.
- The future seems hopeless.
• It seems like I will feel this way forever.
• There are times when I feel I would be better off dead than to feel this way.

**Postpartum Anxiety**

Postpartum anxiety can occur during the same time period as postpartum depression (typically 2 weeks to 1 year after the birth of your baby). These symptoms may accompany those of depression:

• Anxiety.
• Unable to concentrate.
• Afraid to go out.
• Fear of being alone.
• Feeling trapped.
• Guilt.
• Irritability.
• Unable to sleep.
• Constant fears for baby’s health.
• Anger/rage.
• Rapid heartbeat.
• Dizziness.
• Hyperventilating.
• Tingling/numbness.
• Nausea/vomiting.
• Muscle tension.
• Diarrhea.

**Scary or Intrusive Thoughts**

It is not uncommon for a mother to have scary thoughts with a postpartum mood disorder. She may be flooded with thoughts about harm coming to her baby, such as, “What if I drop her out of the window” or “put her in the microwave.” “Maybe there is something seriously wrong with my baby.” “I am a terrible mother. My baby should have a different mother.”
Sometimes these thoughts are constant and go along with a ritual such as constant checking and re-checking the baby; checking to make sure no knives are missing or getting rid of all the knives in the house; doing safety checks on the house and locks.

These behaviors are often disruptive to family functioning. Most women will realize these thoughts and behaviors are due to their situation and are not real. However, a small number of women may believe their thoughts or believe that someone outside of herself is telling her to do things. The latter is much more serious and requires attention right away from a health care provider.

The most important thing to remember is to share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust, such as your partner, close friend, or provider, so they can get you the help you need. Mental health services should be accessed if any of these symptoms occur.

**Things You Can Do to Feel Better**

Below is a list of things you can do to lessen the baby blues or symptoms of depression and anxiety. You may not feel well enough to do many or any of the things listed. However, it may be a reminder that you do hold the power to get help and to help yourself.

- Rest when your baby sleeps.
- Let your partner know how you are feeling.
- Make your needs a priority.
- Let others know what they can do to help.
- Avoid strict or rigid schedules.
- Give yourself permission to have negative feelings.
- Screen phone calls.
- Do not expect too much from yourself right now.
- Avoid overdoing anything.
- Be careful about asking too many people for advice.
- Trust your instincts.
• Set limits with visitors.
• Avoid people who make you feel bad.
• Set boundaries with people you can’t avoid.
• Eat well.
• Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
• Take a walk.
• Take a bath, once your doctor or midwife says it’s OK.
• Set small goals for yourself.
• Stay on all medications you have been instructed to take.
• Don’t be afraid to ask for help.
• Get out of the house.
• Don’t feel guilty, it wastes energy.
• Prioritize what needs to be done and what can wait.
• Don’t compare yourself to others.
• Thank your partner for helping you.
• Do not blame yourself.
• Delegate household duties.
• Do the best you can. Even if it doesn’t feel like enough, it’s enough for now.
• Encourage your partner to seek support from friends and outside activities.
• Confide in someone you trust.
• Remind yourself that all adjustments take time.

Other helpful measures include supportive counseling, medication, or both. You can discuss these options with your doctor, midwife, nurse, or social worker.

**Helpful Tips for Partners, Families, and Friends**

Here are examples of statements that are helpful to say to a mother who is struggling with a postpartum mood disorder, to help her know you care and that you understand what she
is going through. After the first list of things to say is a list of things NOT to say.

**DO tell her:**

- You know she feels terrible.
- She will get better.
- She is doing all the right things to get better (counseling, medications, etc.).
- You still can be a good mother and feel terrible.
- It’s OK to make mistakes. Things don’t need to be done perfectly.
- You know how hard she’s working at this right now.
- You will help with the baby and chores. Let her know she can ask for your help as she needs it.
- You know she’s doing the best she can.
- You love her.
- Her baby will be fine.

**Do NOT tell her:**

- She should get over this.
- You are tired of her feeling this way.
- This should be the happiest time of her life.
- You liked her better the way she was before.
- She’ll snap out of this.
- She would feel better if only: she were working or not working, got out of the house more or stayed home more, etc.
- She should lose weight, color her hair, buy new clothes, etc.
- All new mothers feel this way.
- This is just a phase.
- Since she wanted a baby, this is what she has to go through.
- You know she’s strong enough to get through this on her own and she doesn’t need help.
There is a Lot of Help Out There

There are many local resources for women and partners experiencing postpartum mood disorders.

- **Postpartum Mood Disorder Support (Seattle):**
  888-404-7763 (PPMD); Web site: www.ppmdsupport.com
  Free support groups, newsletter, and telephone support.

- **Crisis Clinic:** 1-800-244-5767

- **Northwest Association for Postpartum Support (NAPS):**
  206-956-1955; Web site: www.naps-doulas.org

- **This Is Not What I Expected! Emotional Care for New Families Support Group:** Postpartum mood disorder support group for mothers, partners, and their families. Infants welcome (mother’s choice).
  Evergreen Hospital, 12040 N.E. 128th, Kirkland, WA 98034
  First and third Thursdays of the month, 7 to 9 p.m.
  Contact: 425-899-3602

- **Beyond the Birth: What No One Ever Talks About**
  by Dawn Gruen, MSW and Rex Gentry, MD
  To order, call: 206-283-9278 or visit www.ppmdsupport.com.

- **Family Services/Listening Mothers – “Beyond the Baby Blues”:** Provides comprehensive clinical interventions for women and their families, including psychotherapy for individuals and couples, or ongoing psychotherapy groups.
  425-450-0332; Web site: www.family-services.org

- **Depression During and After Pregnancy: A Resource for Women, Their Families and Friends** by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. Web site:
  www.mchb.hrsa.gov/pregnancyandbeyond/depression

Many patients find private therapy helpful. Please contact your doctor, midwife, nurse, or social worker for a referral.