



Positive Parenting

Feeling Depressed After the Birth of Your Baby

For most parents, having a baby is a very positive experience. However, as many as one in five mothers can have feelings of sadness or depression after the birth of their baby. It is not always easy to adjust to the responsibility and lifestyle changes that come with a baby. Mothers also need to adjust to changes in their body during pregnancy and following childbirth. It is important for new parents to look after themselves during this time of change. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you understand your feelings and manage this period of adjustment. It also gives some suggestions to help you recognise the signs of depression and get appropriate help if you need it.



What To Expect After Your Baby Is Born

Within the first ten days after the birth of a baby, about two-thirds of all mothers feel emotionally fragile or numb. Many mothers are easily upset and tearful around the third day after childbirth. These feelings are extremely common and are known as baby blues. Baby blues may be caused by tiredness, the stress of childbirth and changes in hormones. The feelings are mild and pass quickly. Baby blues do not require any treatment.

Most new mothers have a mixture of feelings that may include sadness. The extent to which you feel down or sad may be related to any of the following:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of a new baby at home, family demands and household chores.
- Finding that parenthood is not what you expected.
- Tiredness, exhaustion and lack of sleep.
- Persistent physical discomfort or pain following childbirth.
- Lack of support from those close to you.
- Lack of contact with other adults.
- Loss of your old lifestyle.
- Unhappiness over how you look.

When parents feel bad, they are less likely to do things they enjoy and they may doubt their ability to do things. For example, if you are feeling down, you may not feel like spending time with your baby, and you may become less confident in your ability to ever enjoy any time with them. This can make you feel even worse.

How To Help Yourself Adjust

Have Realistic Expectations

Looking after your baby will keep you busy, so try to be realistic about what other things can be achieved in a day and set yourself reasonable goals. Put off difficult jobs for a while or ask for help if you need it. Also, remember to look for what you are doing well and praise yourself for your achievements.

It is also important to be realistic about your new role. Do not be hard on yourself. It will take time to get to know your baby and learn how to find out and meet your baby's needs. As you and your baby settle in and start to develop a routine you will feel more confident. Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect parent—everyone makes mistakes.

Look After Yourself

Although you may not have much time or even feel like it, try to maintain a healthy lifestyle by getting out of the house, doing some exercise and eating well. Try to rest at times when your baby is sleeping, although this may be difficult if you have other children at home. If you cannot sleep during the day, try to sit with your feet up. Take some deep breaths and try to relax your body. See the *Coping with Stress* tip sheet in this series for more information on ways to relax.

Your own needs are just as important as your baby's. You need to do things that you enjoy so you feel you have your own life. If you find this difficult, start by making time to do at least one thing you enjoy doing each day, like having a long bath or reading a magazine—half an hour can make a big difference. Ask your partner or a friend or relative to look after your baby for half an hour or so each day so you can have some time to yourself. If you have a partner, occasionally organise child care so you can have some time alone as a couple. Try to have some special time with the rest of your family every day, such as reading a story to your older children at bedtime.

Talk About How You Feel

Talk about your feelings with someone you feel close to. If you are feeling particularly sad or depressed while you are still in hospital, act straight away. Talk about your concerns with hospital staff. Organise to have someone with you when you return home.

Organise Practical Help

Arrange for someone to help you in the first few days when you return home with your baby. Accept help if it is offered. Do not feel guilty about accepting help. People love to help with new babies. Keep your own workload small so you can rest and help your body recover from childbirth. Ask for help with the housework or to care for your baby if none is offered.

Find Support

If you enjoy talking to other parents, find a local support group such as a First Time Mothers Group run by Maternal and Child Health Services. Some support groups will even organise home help for new parents. If you are concerned about your baby's health or development, seek advice from your doctor or maternal and child health nurse.

How To Recognise Postnatal Depression

Sometimes feelings of sadness or depression deepen and last longer than baby blues. If feelings of depression persist, you may have postnatal depression. About one in five women experience depression after the birth of a baby. This can happen any time in the first year, but usually starts in the early weeks after childbirth. If depression is severe enough to interfere with daily activities and lasts for more than two weeks, it is called postnatal or post partum depression. It can last from many weeks to many months. Postnatal depression may occur after the birth of any child.

There are many signs of postnatal depression and they vary in different women. Women who have postnatal depression may experience some of the following:

- Crying for no apparent reason.
- Overwhelming feelings of anxiety, irritability, resentment or anger.
- Loss of self-confidence.
- Disinterest in the baby, family, friends and life in general.
- Exhaustion, problems sleeping, and being overly concerned about lack of sleep.
- Poor concentration and problems getting organised.
- Loss of appetite or overeating.
- Thoughts about hurting the baby or themselves.
- Thoughts of suicide.
- Exaggerated fears about their health and safety or that of their baby or partner.
- Feelings of inadequacy, failure and being unable to cope with the baby.
- Prolonged loss of interest in a sexual relationship (beyond six months after childbirth).

Many women can have some of these experiences, but not be depressed. However, if you are concerned or distressed by any of these experiences, seek help from your doctor or maternal and child health nurse. You may have postnatal depression.

What Causes Postnatal Depression?

Postnatal depression is a complex condition. It affects women of all ages, class and culture. Nobody really knows what causes depression, but women who have been depressed have reported some of the following:

- Feeling unsupported or isolated.
- Relationship problems with their partner.

- Tiredness and exhaustion.
- Stressful life events such as moving house, divorce or death in the family.
- Being physically unwell.
- Lack of time and space to themselves.
- Complications during or after birth such as caesarean section or forceps delivery.
- Dissatisfaction with their maternity care.
- A difficult or unsettled baby.
- High expectations about how they will cope as mothers, as well as in the work force.
- History of poor relationships.
- Previous experience of loss.

Women who have a family history of depression seem to be more vulnerable to postnatal depression than others.

What To Do if You Feel Depressed

Notice the Problem

The first step to doing something about depression is recognising the problem. Depression drains you of your energy, confidence and enjoyment. While you may be able to look after your baby's physical needs, you may get little pleasure from your baby or resent your baby's demands on you. You may also feel guilty about feeling sad at a time when you believe you should feel happy. Depression can strain your relationship with your partner and others. It can also affect how you relate to your baby, which can affect your baby's development.

Talk to Someone

Many women find it difficult to talk about how they are feeling. It is common for depressed mothers to feel that they are the only ones who cannot cope with being a parent and that they are a failure. If you are feeling depressed or struggling to keep going, do not be ashamed. Postnatal depression is not your fault. There is nothing to feel guilty about. Remind yourself that as many as one in five mothers feel the same way. Mothers who have experienced depression recommend finding someone to talk to about how you are feeling.

Visit a Health Professional

It is also important to talk about your feelings with your doctor or maternal and child health nurse. They may refer you to a professional who has expertise in helping mothers and their families in overcoming postnatal depression. You may be offered home help, relaxation, medication or counselling. There are specialist postnatal

depression services that offer a range of services to families. You also may be offered a short-term stay if you are not confident about providing the daily care your child needs.

Keep Looking for the Help You Want

Mothers who have been depressed found it helpful when health professionals listened and acknowledged their feelings and offered emotional and practical support. Sometimes mothers have bad experiences when they seek help. Health professionals can be unhelpful when they dismiss your feelings as trivial or when they do not give you time to talk about your feelings. Try not to be put off if you have a bad experience when you seek help. Keep looking for a health professional who will listen and give you the help you want.

Join a Support Group

It can be helpful to talk to other parents who have had similar experiences. Speak to your maternal and child health nurse or call PaNDa on 9428 4600 for information about support groups for postnatal depression in your area. You can also learn about other parents' experiences with depression by reading pamphlets and magazine articles. This may help you understand more about how you are feeling and help you realise that you are not the only one to feel this way.

Points To Remember

Many mothers and their family and friends do not recognise postnatal depression when it occurs. Even if you are not sure if you have postnatal depression, it is best to seek help straight away. Early treatment and support will help you recover from any depression and enjoy your life and family.

A Note to Partners

If your partner is suffering from postnatal depression, you may be confused by the things they do, notice a loss of intimacy and companionship, and find it hard to understand what they are going through. The best thing you can do is to be available to listen if your partner feels like talking. Provide reassurance and support, and give your partner as much practical help as you can, such as caring for the baby, preparing meals and taking on more household chores. Help your partner find the professional help and support they need by finding out about available services, helping to make appointments and going with your partner for appointments.

A Note to Family and Friends

Many depressed parents do not ask for help. Family and friends should be aware of the possibility of postnatal depression. Both mothers and fathers can become depressed after the birth of a baby. A new parent may be depressed if you think they have lost some of their usual enthusiasm, or notice they have become disorganised, moody or irritable. Ask how they are feeling. Take time to listen to them when they talk about their feelings. If the new parent does not have the energy to seek help themselves, find out about available services for them. Offer temporary, practical help with chores and caring for the baby, such as preparing meals, shopping for groceries, changing nappies or minding other children.

Key Steps

Taking Care of Yourself

- Be realistic about your new role and what you can get done each day—set yourself small achievable goals.
- Look after yourself physically and make sure your own needs are being met.
- Talk about how you are feeling.
- Ask for help with everyday activities such as housework.
- Try to have special time for yourself as well as time for your family.

Dealing with Depression

- Recognise the problem.
- Do not feel guilty or ashamed of how you feel.
- Talk about your feelings.
- Keep seeking help until you get it.
- Find out about support groups in your area.

If you have any questions or have tried these suggestions and are concerned about how you feel, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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