

Let's talk about...

Postpartum Depression

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

MANY NEW MOTHERS EXPERIENCE MOOD SWINGS, FEELING JOYFUL ONE MINUTE AND DEPRESSED THE NEXT. THESE FEELINGS, SOMETIMES CALLED THE "BABY BLUES," DISAPPEAR WITHIN 10 DAYS OF DELIVERY. BUT AN ESTIMATED 10 PERCENT OF NEW MOMS EXPERIENCE A MORE SEVERE FORM OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS KNOWN AS POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION. THIS FORM OF DEPRESSION IS NOT A CHARACTER FLAW OR WEAKNESS AND COULD BE REGARDED AS SIMPLY PART OF GIVING BIRTH. A COUPLE OF WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA, BROOKE SHIELDS AND MARIE OSMOND, SUFFERED WITH POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION AND WROTE BOOKS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES.

Despite the fact that references to postpartum depression date back as far as the 4th century, it has not always been recognized as an illness. Unfortunately it continues to be under-diagnosed, even though the illness can be successfully treated. If you are suffering from postpartum depression, you may be too embarrassed to admit you are not coping as well as you had imagined you would. Since depressive feelings often involve intense and irrational feelings of fear, you may feel out of control.

The exact cause of postpartum depression is not known. Generally it is agreed that a variety of factors may be at work. One factor may be the changes in hormone levels that occur during pregnancy and immediately after childbirth. New moms may be sleep-deprived, overwhelmed, and anxious about their ability to care for a newborn, leading to a sense they've lost control over their life.

Women who have suffered from depression in the past are at an increased risk of suffering from postpartum depression. In addition, an estimated 10-35% of women will experience a recurrence of postpartum depression.

DEFINING POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Researchers have identified three types of postpartum depression:

Baby blues is the most minor form and it is estimated that between 50-80% of new mothers experience it. It usually starts one to three days after delivery and lasts for a few days or weeks. Symptoms include mood swings, anxiety, sadness, irritability, crying, decreased concentration, and trouble sleeping.

Postpartum depression may appear to be baby blues at first, but the signs and symptoms are more intense and longer lasting, eventually interfering with your ability to care for the baby and handle other daily activities. Symptoms include loss of appetite, insomnia, intense irritability and anger, overwhelming fatigue, loss of interest in sex, lack of joy in life, feelings of shame, guilt or inadequacy, severe mood swings, difficulty bonding with the baby, and withdrawal from family and friends.

Postpartum psychosis is a relatively rare disorder affecting only one in 1000 births. Symptoms include confusion and disorientation, hallucinations and delusions, paranoia, and attempts to harm one's self or the baby.

TREATMENT

It is important to talk with your doctor if you are feeling depressed after your baby's birth. The sooner postpartum depression is diagnosed, the more effective the treatment.

Your doctor may ask you to complete a depression-screening questionnaire to distinguish the severity of the depression. Blood tests can help determine whether an underactive thyroid is contributing to your symptoms.

Your doctor may recommend therapy, support networks, and/or medications such as antidepressants. Psychotherapy has been shown to be an effective treatment and an acceptable choice for women who wish to avoid taking medications while breastfeeding.

While postpartum depression isn't generally a condition you can treat on your own, there are some things you can do to support your treatment plan:

Make healthy lifestyle choices. Rest as much as you can. Include physical activity, such as a walk with your baby, in your daily routine. Eat healthy foods — plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Avoid alcohol.

Set realistic expectations. Don't pressure yourself to do everything. Scale back your expectations for the perfect household. Do what you can and leave the rest.

Make time for yourself. If you feel like the world is coming down around you, take some time for yourself. Get dressed, leave the house, and visit a friend or run an errand. Or schedule some time alone with your partner.

Avoid isolation. Talk with your partner, family and friends about how you're feeling. Ask other mothers about their experiences. Ask your doctor about local support groups for new moms who have postpartum depression.

RECOMMENDED READING.

Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression, Brooke Shields, Hyperion Publishers

Behind the Smile: My Journey Out of Postpartum Depression, Marie Osmond, Warner Books, Inc.



healthy people • healthy workplace

