

Postpartum Depression

By Elizabeth Pantley, author of *Gentle Baby Care* and *The No-Cry Sleep Solution*

QUESTION: I know that it's normal to have the "baby blues" right after you have a baby, but my son is six weeks old. I thought everything would be wonderful by now and I would be so in love with my baby. I thought mothering would come easily. It's not that way at all! I can't sleep, even when he's sleeping. I feel hollow inside, like the real me is gone. Sometimes I cry for hours; other times, I feel angry enough to explode. Life feels like an endless amusement park ride, and sometimes I just want to get off. Why am I such a terrible mother?

Learn about it

You're *not* a terrible mother! You are a mother who is suffering from a condition known as postpartum depression, a condition that is treatable. While as many as 80% of mothers experience a temporary and mild condition referred to as the baby blues, up to 15% of women have the more severe reaction you're experiencing. Having PPD doesn't mean that you have done something wrong, or that something is wrong with you; it is an illness and it can be cured. Once you learn more about what's causing your despondent emotions and take some steps toward treatment, you'll be on the road to finding yourself again and enjoying your baby.

What is postpartum depression?

PPD is a medical condition — a specific type of depression that occurs within the first few months after childbirth. It is caused by the biochemical and hormonal changes that happen in the body after pregnancy and birth...nothing that is within your control.

What are the symptoms of postpartum depression?

While PPD affects all women differently, a few typical symptoms can help your physician make the diagnosis. You probably are not experiencing *everything* on the following list, and the degree of symptoms may range from mild to severe, but if a number of these apply to you, you may be suffering from PPD.

Symptoms of postpartum depression may include but are not limited to:

- Feeling hopeless, worthless or inadequate
- Frequent crying or tearfulness
- Insomnia or sleepiness
- Lack of energy
- Loss of pleasure in activities you normally enjoy
- Difficulty doing typical daily chores
- Loss of appetite
- Feelings of sadness and despair
- Feelings of guilt, panic or confusion
- Feelings of anger or anxiety
- Extreme mood swings
- Memory loss
- Overconcern for baby
- Fear of "losing control"
- Lack of interest in sex

- Worrying that you may hurt your baby
- A desire to escape from your baby or your family
- Withdrawal from social circles and routines
- Thoughts about hurting yourself

If you suffer from extreme degrees of any of these symptoms, particularly thoughts about hurting yourself or your baby, or if you have additional physical symptoms such as hallucinations, confusion or paranoia, then please call a doctor today. *NOW*. Your condition requires immediate medical care. If you can't make the call, then please talk to your partner, your mother or father, a sibling or close friend and ask them to help you arrange for help. Do this for yourself and for your baby. If you can't talk about it, rip this page out and hand it to someone close to you. It's that important. *You do not have to feel this way.*

What can a doctor do about postpartum depression?

As with any form of depression, help is available and only as far away as your healthcare provider — contact your ob/gyn or midwife to start with, if that's most comfortable for you. She can help you get the professional care you need from someone who has experience dealing with this condition. In the longer term, it's important that your therapy take place with a professional who has experience in treating PPD; the malady is different from other forms of depression, and it is very specifically related to your role as a new mother.

PARENT TIP

"In the time it takes you to read this chapter, you could set up an appointment with a doctor. Remember, this is a medical problem and it can be serious; for your sake, for your baby, and for all those who love you, you must make that call. With help, you will regain your life and your perspective."

Vanessa, mother of Kimmy (12) Tyler (10) Rachel (5) and Zachary (3)

A visit to a doctor for the symptoms you're feeling is nothing to fear. Your condition is something your doctor has seen before — so you need not feel at all self-conscious. As for treatment, there are a variety of options, depending on how severe your symptoms are. Your doctor will evaluate your condition and may suggest medication, such as antidepressants. (Make sure that you let him know if you are breastfeeding so that the proper medication can be prescribed.) In addition, he will tell you that therapy and support are critical for recovery.

What can I do about PPD?

The first step you can take is to understand that you have an illness that requires action on your part so you can heal. Forgive me for repeating this, but it is important: Take that first step and call a doctor. In addition, the following things can help you begin to feel better right away:

Talk to someone. Whom do you trust? Whom do you feel comfortable talking to? This might be your spouse or partner, it might be your mother, your sister or brother or a friend. It can really help to share your feelings with someone who cares about you. Even if you feel you can't talk specifically about PPD, just discuss your feelings and your new role as a mother and its effects on you.

Read books about baby care and parenting. Knowledge is power. Reading may help you feel more confident, which in turn will help you feel more in control of your situation. It will also give you the knowledge you'll need to ward off the unwanted advice or criticism that can come your way during the early months of parenting, and that can be especially hard to take when you are feeling depressed.

Join a support group. PPD support groups allow mothers who are dealing with depression to talk with others who have similar feelings. A list at the end of this section can help you find a group in your area. You might also call your health care provider, your local hospital, or your church for information. While PPD support groups are an excellent choice, any group for new mothers in which you can share your feelings about motherhood can help you feel better about yourself. Choose your support group with care, as you'll want to be around people who support your parenting decisions. Being with a group who criticizes or questions your mothering choices will make you feel worse, not better. Conversely, spending your time with like-minded people will boost your self-confidence and help you feel more confident as a mother. This idea shouldn't be seen as a cure, but rather one part of the process of recovery.

Accept help from others. If anyone offers to help you — whether it is to take your baby for a walk, cook a meal, or drive your older kids to sports practice — accept! Learn to say *yes*. You don't have to do everything to be a good mother. It's natural for human beings to lean on each other, so go ahead and do a little more leaning.

Get some extra sleep. Put your efforts to get your baby to sleep through the night on hold right now; this will come in time. Forget about the clock. Just sleep — both of you — whenever you can. Extra sleep will help you feel better.

Relax your standards. This is not the time to worry about a spotless house, gourmet meals, the corporate ladder, or your manicure. Try to stick to the basics and concentrate on yourself and your baby.

Get some fresh air. When possible, put your baby in the sling or the stroller and take a walk. The exercise and open spaces will help you feel more energized. Try to work a daily stroll into your schedule. If you have older children, walk them to school. If the weather isn't suitable for outdoor walking, then drive to a shopping mall for an indoor walk.

Feed yourself healthy foods. You can eat properly without much effort. Focus on fresh fruits and vegetables, and simple but nutritious meals. And eat frequently. Going long stretches without food wreaks havoc on your system. Simple snacks like an apple with peanut butter, a bagel, or yogurt with cottage cheese are easy to prepare and prevent your blood sugar from dipping and adding to your feelings of depression. Continue to take vitamins, and drink plenty of water.

Love yourself. You are going to be okay. Take it one step at a time...but do take steps (such as those outlined in this section). With help and time, you'll develop a refreshing and healthy outlook on your new role as a mother.

For more information

Books

This Isn't What I Expected: Overcoming Postpartum Depression, by Karen Kleiman and Valerie Davis Raskin (Bantam Books, 1994)

Beyond The Blues: Prenatal and Postpartum Depression, A Treatment Manual by Shoshana Bennett and Pec Indman (Moodswings Press, 2002)

The No-Cry Sleep Solution: Gentle Ways to Help Your Baby Sleep Through the Night
By Elizabeth Pantley (McGraw-Hill, 2002)

Web sites

Pacific Post Partum Support Society

www.postpartum.org

Depression After Delivery, Inc.

www.depressionafterdelivery.com

To locate a support group

Postpartum Support International

www.chss.iup.edu/postpartum

Postpartum Education for Parents

www.sbpep.org

La Leche League Support Groups

www.lalecheleague.org/WebIndex.html

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