

Post-Partum Adjustment

Expectant parents often spend a great deal of time educating themselves about pregnancy and delivery, and not nearly as much time preparing themselves for the emotional changes and physical demands that occur after the baby's birth. This can leave some women more susceptible to the hormonal changes that occur after childbirth, compounded with the decreased sleep and intense caretaking required of a newborn. Research indicates that women are more vulnerable to developing a mood or anxiety disorder in the months surrounding birth than at any other time in their life (O'Hara, 1999).

A postpartum mood disorder is a mental health disorder occurring within the first year of giving birth. Between 60- 80% of mothers experience some form of postpartum adjustment challenge after the birth of a child. 10-20% will experience postpartum depression. Postpartum mood disorders are classified along a continuum. The least severe, *Postpartum Blues*, has symptoms that usually appear three or four days postpartum and diminish around day fourteen. Symptoms that continue past two weeks should be evaluated. Further along the continuum of severity is *Postpartum Depression*. Symptoms can appear anytime within the first year after birth and do not generally disappear on their own. *Postpartum Psychosis*, which is very rare, is the most severe disorder and can occur very soon up to a couple of weeks after giving birth. Women in the postpartum period may also experience *Panic Disorder*, *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, or *Post-Traumatic Stress Reaction*.

Symptoms of *Postpartum Blues* are sadness, feelings of loss, crying for little or no reason, irritability, oversensitivity, sleep disturbance, lack of energy, feeling overwhelmed, or anxious. Symptoms of *Postpartum Depression* can include the above symptoms as well as loss of pleasure in life, difficulty making decisions, not bonding with the baby, panic attacks, inability to cope, anger, or confusion. *Postpartum Psychosis* symptoms include inability to sleep, extreme anxiety, rapid mood swings, hallucinations or delusions, as well as thoughts of suicide and/or infanticide. It is extremely important to seek help immediately if symptoms of psychosis manifest.

The postpartum woman should surround herself with supportive people for both emotional and physical support. This can decrease feelings of isolation as well as normalize the experience and transition from woman to mother. It is very important for the new mother to get rest and take care of herself physically, including eating and drinking regularly and letting the body heal from birth. Other self-care suggestions for the weeks postpartum are doing light exercise, such as stretching or walking, and getting fresh air and sunlight exposure a few minutes each day. It is also important for the postpartum mother to have some time to herself to recharge emotionally. If a woman's symptoms continue beyond two weeks, she should seek additional help from her doctor or therapist. Treatment for postpartum depression is generally antidepressant medication in combination with therapy.

The birth of a baby is an event of dramatic proportions. It is a physically and emotionally taxing experience filled with happiness and joy, as well as loss and stress. The family equilibrium has been disrupted and must be renegotiated with new roles, new expectations, and new responsibilities. Additionally, hormonal and physical changes, along with sleep disruption and physical healing can create a time of postpartum adjustment that for some develops into an adjustment disorder. Many women do not want to admit they are having difficulty due to feelings of guilt or embarrassment. Not asking for help can lead to further isolation and deepening depression. Not only is it ok to ask for help, it is necessary.