

What is Postpartum Depression?

Most women believe childbearing is one of life's most significant events. But the birth of a baby is also a major life transition that can be accompanied by a wide range of emotions. There are differences between the "baby blues" (which pass on their own) and postpartum depression (which is a more serious condition).

The "baby blues" are very common after childbirth and affect about 70 to 85 percent of all new mothers. The "baby blues" are caused, in part, by the rapid changes in hormones within a woman's body after giving birth. Fatigue that comes with the healing process and the demands of caring for a new baby also contribute to "baby blues."

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a much more serious condition with symptoms that can negatively affect the mother once her baby is born. These symptoms can change her behavior, personality and outlook. They also affect relationships with the father, family and friends.

The birth of a baby is a time of great joy with our society idealizing motherhood. But women can also find themselves feeling overwhelmed, anxious, stressed and frustrated. They may even have negative feelings toward their child that can make them feel confused and guilty. Many new mothers are ashamed to admit these feelings. They may feel that they are a "bad mother" for having such thoughts. And so they suffer in silence.

Symptoms of Postpartum Depression

At least one in ten new mothers experience various degrees of postpartum depression. These feelings can occur within days after delivery or appear gradually sometimes up to a year or more later.

Symptoms may include:

- Sluggishness, fatigue, exhaustion
- Sadness, depression, hopelessness, worthlessness
- Appetite and sleep disturbances
- Poor concentration, confusion
- Memory loss
- Overconcern for the baby
- Uncontrollable crying, irritability
- Lack of interest in the baby
- Guilt, inadequacy, worthlessness
- Fear of harming the baby or yourself
- Exaggerated highs and/or lows
- Lack of interest in sex

When to Get Help and Support

Doctors often do not discuss or prepare expectant mothers about how the change in hormones, sleep deprivation or a colicky baby can cause a whole range of emotions. These emotional changes before and after childbirth are common. The symptoms can vary from very mild to a very severe condition called "postpartum psychosis." This affects less than 1% of new mothers but requires immediate intervention.

Husbands, partners and families can be affected by postpartum depression too. Men also need to seek treatment if they have symptoms that interfere with their day-to-day lives. Despite all the anticipation, the reality of one's responsibility for this baby can be overwhelming.

Women experiencing postpartum depression symptoms should contact their health care professional and get a complete medical evaluation, including a thyroid screening. A skilled doctor can address these concerns and determine if further evaluation or treatment is indicated. Some treatment options include medications, support groups or other types of talk therapy.

The Congregation's Role

Most churches will share the joy of your new baby. There are usually congratulation cards, a rosebud may be put on the altar the following Sunday and casseroles or other offers of support may come the week following the birth. Parishioners ask the mother when they can expect to see her and the baby in church, and plans are often made for baptism in the first few months after the birth. It is the rare church that addresses the emotional aftermath of childbirth.

Do not be afraid to ask for what you need during this time. If family, friends and church members ask how they can help, consider giving them small tasks to do such as bringing meals, household chores, running errands, helping take care of the new baby or other children, educating themselves about these symptoms and spending time with you.

The Opportunities of a Caring Faith Community

Your congregation can support you and your family by:

- Becoming educated about the symptoms of depression
- Help families know it is all right to discuss these issues
- Have information on appropriate community professionals
- Train "mentors" to be assigned to new families for extra support
- Provide spiritual support and assurance

Many parents chose to use the rituals of their faith to welcome their new baby into the church family. Rituals can include baptism, a blessing, a dedication or another ritual when the parents and church family make promises to raise the child in the faith.

Whether or not parents choose to baptize their baby as an infant or child or whether they wait until the child is old enough to profess his or her own faith, the church affirms that every child, and each of us is unique and precious in God's sight. God is already acting in the life of each child even before the child knows it. In the same way, God is present in the lives of each person whether we are aware of it or not. Each person is known by name and loved unconditionally by our Creator.

The church can be a "vessel of hope" and assurance of God's care, presence and compassion when we go through difficult times. This knowledge can sustain us through our times of fear, uncertainty and confusion. God's promise to never leave us desolate is "amazing grace."

For More Information

Postpartum Support International (PSI)
www.postpartum.net

The National Women's Health Information Center
www.4woman.gov

Depression After Delivery, Inc.
www.depressionafterdelivery.com

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
www.nami.org

Postpartum Education for Parents
www.sbpep.org

Mental Health Ministries
www.MentalHealthMinistries.net
Postpartum Depression DVD available

Free copies of this brochure may be downloaded from
www.MentalHealthMinistries.net

Breaking The Silence



As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.....Isaiah 66:13 (NRSV)

Postpartum Depression and Families of Faith

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