

Sad Feelings After Childbirth – A 'Hidden' Problem

Although having a baby is usually a happy event, it is also true that some women become depressed or anxious after the birth of a child. This problem is called post-partum depression. Yet it is often a 'hidden' problem because some women find it hard to talk about. Women who feel sad or anxious are often afraid to tell anyone, in case other people think they are a 'bad' mother or that they cannot cope. This can make these women feel even more isolated.

But confidential help is available for women with post-partum depression and anxiety. Planning ahead, having a partner who is supportive, and knowing who can help, reduces the risk of these problems.

What are the symptoms of post-partum depression?

Post-partum depression can happen at any time during the first year after the birth of a baby.

It is normal for a woman to feel emotional and anxious just after a baby is born. But if this lasts for more than two weeks, or if she feels overwhelmed by symptoms like those listed below, it is important to get help.

- Feeling 'down'; loss of interest or enjoyment in things
- Problems with appetite
- Difficulty getting back to sleep at night after feeding the baby
- Feeling exhausted even months after the birth
- Crying, feeling irritable, anxious or confused; feeling inadequate
- Having panic attacks; not wanting to be left alone
- Loss of interest in sex, even when the baby is a few months old
- Not wanting to go out or see people

What causes post-partum depression?

New babies are rewarding but they may create many stresses too. Motherhood is a new role with hard work, responsibility and little sleep. It may take time to adjust. Parenthood can be particularly difficult for single parents, or for couples with no family close by to help. Sometimes people say 'my mother brought up six children - how come a woman with only one or two children has problems?' But times change and more couples are bringing up children without the support of relatives, and there may be more financial pressure forcing both parents to work. Language difficulties and past experiences with torture or trauma can also add to the stress of new motherhood.

In some cultures, the older generation may believe post-partum depression is caused by not following traditional practices during pregnancy and after childbirth but research shows this is not a cause. Having post-partum depression does not mean a woman is not a good mother. Nor is it a punishment from God.

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What can you do to lower the risk of getting post-partum depression?

By planning ahead while you are still pregnant (especially if you have had post-partum depression with a previous pregnancy).

- Plan to avoid other big changes around the time of the birth (for example, moving house, home renovations, changing jobs).
- Prepare for the birth by attending prenatal classes (even if you have already had a baby).
- Prepare your partner. Talk about the extra workload which the new baby will involve. Ask your partner to plan as much time off work as possible after the birth.
- Try to arrange support from family or friends after the birth, especially if you have other children. Or ask your midwife or hospital social worker about support services in your area.
- If you have had post-partum depression after a previous pregnancy, tell your doctor and midwife.

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