

Planning for Postpartum Life: When New Mothers Need Mothering, Too

The pregnancy test is positive! You see that little bean of a baby on your first ultrasound and proudly share this first snapshot with family and friends. You dutifully go to all of your prenatal appointments, so excited to hear the galloping of your baby's heartbeat. You attend childbirth classes and register for every baby gadget on the market. At your baby shower everyone celebrates YOU, and that beautiful round belly carrying the most precious cargo. You are prepared, ready to be a mom.

Leaving the hospital with your new bundle of joy, the nurses mention something about "postpartum depression," but you think to yourself, "that surely won't happen to me." So who does it happen to? Here's a pop quiz.

Mom "A" tells everyone she feels great. She's up early, tries to look perfect and get back into shape. The house is spotless and so is the baby. But she wonders how long she can keep this up. Inside she feels like a totally different person.

Mom "B" doesn't feel like herself at all. She can't get her head off the couch. She can't seem to take care of herself and can barely take care of the baby.

Mom "C" can't enjoy the baby, because she is always worrying about him. What if she dropped him? What if he stopped breathing? She is constantly checking him, can't sleep, and won't let anyone else look after him.

Mom "D" feels so irritable. She gets angry at the littlest thing. No one can do anything right, folding the laundry or changing the baby. Her family and friends are tiptoeing around her, but she just can't stop getting angry.

Which one of these mothers has postpartum depression? They ALL do. Society gets caught up in the perfect stroller; yet, no one talks about the chaos that sometimes comes after new families go home. Parenting is not a perfect science, and here's a secret...there are no "perfect mothers."

After childbirth there is a dramatic drop in pregnancy hormones. This, along with the cumulative effects of countless sleepless nights can cause a shift in the brain chemistry which may contribute to mood swings, anxiety, or depressed mood. Normal life stressors like finances or lack of family support can compound mom's adaptation to her new role. When one tries to juggle everything, and learn how to care for a newborn (or balance a newborn amidst meeting the needs of OLDER children), this can feel very overwhelming.

Over 80% of women will experience "baby blues," a normal period of high and low emotions during the first several weeks following birth. Postpartum depression (PPD) occurs at least 20% of the time, and may present anytime in the first year after birth. Constant, intense feelings of sadness, worry, nervousness,

and emptiness that last 2 weeks or more, affects sleeping and eating habits, or is accompanied by repetitive, intrusive thoughts is an illness requiring medical attention. Postpartum psychosis is rare (0.1%), and may result in paranoia or hallucinations commanding mom to hurt herself or others.

PPD treatment may include medication to treat brain chemistry imbalance, talk therapy to discuss psychological struggles, and support groups where moms can share feelings with others in similar situations. Adequate sleep and nutrition are essential for mom's brain health. The best gift mom can give her baby is to take good care of HERSELF.

At Elliot Hospital, we believe in caring for mother and baby beyond the walls of the maternity unit. The Elliot Postpartum Emotional Support Program provides pregnant and postpartum women with a weekly support group, "warmline" phone support (663-8927), and education on maternal mood disorders. Our "Postpartum Depression Risk Assessment" is distributed to EVERY new mother after

birth. Women can make use of available resources and mobilize support networks if they are aware of factors that may make them vulnerable to PPD. Moms who are "at risk" view a PPD video, receive PPD education, follow up phone calls at home, and are offered VNA visits. By screening universally, we hope to reduce the stigma of perinatal depression by encouraging healthcare providers to talk about it as a common complication of childbirth.

PPD is very treatable. Many women do not want to admit that they are struggling after having a baby. It is supposed to be a happy time of their lives! In reality it is also a major time of change and role adjustment to essentially the most difficult and important job that anyone can do. If you had diabetes you would see an endocrinologist, take insulin, and no one would tell you to "snap out of it." Your brain is an organ. We shouldn't treat the mind any differently. Please find help if you or someone you know is beyond the blues and having a difficult time adjusting to postpartum life.

 **The Elliot.**
Live Better!



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