

# Caring for a New Mother

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Congratulations on the new baby! While you may be prepared for diaper changes, sleepless nights and spit up, you also need to be prepared for how to care for the new mother in your life. Here are some things that you need to know as to help you care for a new mother:

## **Postpartum is a time of increased risk for mood and anxiety disorders:**

It's common for new mothers to feel some sadness and nervousness. If it's mild and lasts just a few weeks, then we call this the "Baby Blues." However, as many as 1 in 5 new mothers experience more severe mental health issues postpartum. These issues can last months, even years, and are more intense than the blues.

## **There are many reasons why the postpartum period is challenging.**

New mothers have been through a lot. The physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth can be overwhelming, impacting well-being, abilities and self-esteem. The sleep deprivation that comes with new motherhood can make it very challenging to cope. Exercise and other forms of self-care tend to get pushed aside to meet the needs of the new baby. Women may feel less personal, financial and professional freedom than they did prior to motherhood. And, of course, the hormonal changes surrounding pregnancy and childbirth play a large role in triggering mental health concerns.

## **The symptoms of postpartum mood and anxiety disorders (PMADs) are diverse.**

You might be looking for obvious signs of sadness like tearfulness. However, the actual symptoms of PMADs vary quite a bit from what you might expect.

**Postpartum Depression** symptoms include feeling empty, sad, worthless, guilty, ashamed, angry, hopeless, overwhelmed and incompetent. These mothers may be tearful but it's even more likely you will notice that she's laughing/joking less and that she is not enjoying life. She may begin withdrawing from friends. You may feel that, since the baby came, she stopped loving you. A depressed mother may experience poor appetite, insomnia and/or oversleeping. Mothers with postpartum depression may think that their baby and partner would be better off without them. Suicidal thoughts, or just thoughts about running away from home, are common with postpartum depression. Mothers who have these thoughts feel very ashamed, which worsens the depression.

**Postpartum OCD** is just as common, if not more common than depression. The most easily recognizable symptom of postpartum anxiety is intrusive thoughts. These are upsetting thoughts about the baby dying or about harming the baby. Most parents have some intrusive thoughts. They are our brain's way of reminding us to take good care of the baby. However, for women with postpartum anxiety, the thoughts trigger anxiety. The mother may experience racing heart, chest pressure, feeling short of breath, tingling skin, stomach upset, insomnia, irritability, fear of being alone with the baby and/or extreme fear of exposing the baby to others due to risk of illness. Mothers with OCD may spend a lot of time researching the safety of products or be intensely vigilant about their dietary concerns, child safety or other related issues. It can be hard, sometimes, to know what is normal mothering and what is overly anxious. It's helpful to seek consultation from a licensed professional with training in perinatal anxiety.

Postpartum can also bring symptoms of **elevated mood**, which can include feeling more energized than normal, feeling very confident, and needing less sleep. It may also include restlessness, agitation, and irritability. These symptoms are particularly serious as they often mark the onset of **postpartum psychosis**, a rare (1-2/1000) and dangerous condition. Mothers with postpartum

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psychosis may have some symptoms that feel good to them, like feeling special and more able to understand the world better than ever before. However, other symptoms can develop that will be frightening and confusing, such as the presence of hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that aren't there), disturbing urges to harm the baby or self. The development of postpartum psychosis is a medical emergency. If you think that a new mother is experiencing these symptoms, you should take her to the ER and contact her OB/GYN office.

### **Treatment is safe and effective.**

Many mothers wait to get treatment, assuming that their postpartum issues will improve on their own. Unfortunately, postpartum mood issues can become chronic, lasting for many months or years, and worsen in severity. The good news is that there are safe and effective treatment available. Both psychotherapy and medication can be helpful.

### **There are many ways that you can help.**

- 1) **Step up to help in any way you can.** Taking care of a baby is a full-time job. You can help reduce a new mother's stress by cooking, cleaning and running errands. It's particularly important that you help the new mother get lots of rest. New mothers need more than 8 hours of sleep to help them recover from childbirth. Given that they will be awoken by the baby, many mothers may need to plan for 10, or more, hours in bed in order to catch the amount of sleep that they need.
- 2) **Be understanding.** While a new mother may have dreamed of this moment for years, it doesn't mean she should always be happy. New motherhood can be very joyful. However, it's a challenging time. Encourage her to be compassionate towards herself.
- 3) **Monitor for symptoms.** Healthy new mothers are tired from sleep loss and worried about taking good care of the baby but should be, overall, similar to their normal selves. If you notice some of the symptoms above, gently bring up your concern with the new mother. Describe the changes that you've noticed to her in a concrete way. For example, you might say "I've noticed that you don't laugh as much as you used to" or "I've noticed that you aren't sleeping well, even when the baby is sleeping." Ask what support she thinks she needs. Consult with a doctor or therapist if you are unsure of how to proceed.
- 4) **Be supportive of treatment.** If the new mother is reluctant to talk to a doctor or therapist, offer to look online to find a good local option. If she's afraid of taking medication while breastfeeding, encourage her to talk to her doctor or consult with the specialists at the Infant Risk Center at Texas Tech (806.352.2519, [infantrisk.com](http://infantrisk.com).) They offer free information on the safety of medications during pregnancy and breastfeeding. If she's concerned about the cost, you can look for lower cost options. You can also let her know that her health is important to you and worth the investment.
- 5) **Consider help for yourself.** If the new mother in your life is struggling, you may find it helpful to seek some support from a therapist familiar with perinatal mental health concerns.