

# What is postnatal depression?

'I feel I cannot handle things well. My baby does not like me, s/he does not giggle when I play with him/her. I expected to feel closer than I do. My baby seems to cry all the time. My baby does things that bother me, My baby's eating or sleeping is much harder than I thought it would be, others seem to manage all right, why can't I?' These are some of the things mothers say, who suffer from postnatal depression or anxiety.

Post natal depression is one of the names used for the severe mood changes that a woman may experience after childbirth. The changes usually start within the first year. It is natural for any woman to experience mood changes after birth, but post natal depression is when the feelings last for more than two weeks, or are very severe, and have a significant negative affect on your life.

This is different to the feelings that are called the 'baby blues', when you may feel down or weepy in the first few days after childbirth. At this time it is very common for women to feel high one moment and low the next. After all, your body, lifestyle and family have just undergone a massive change.

It is estimated that over 20% of all childbearing women suffer some form of emotional problem after the birth of their baby. That is a lot of women! The good news is that if you think you have 'postnatal depression', you can do something about it straight away.

## Do I have postnatal depression?

Remember that having one symptom does not necessarily mean you have postnatal depression. Here is a list. You may recognise some of these descriptions.

You stay at home and avoid going out. You are afraid to be criticised and told you are doing it all wrong.

You feel lethargic, neglect yourself or your baby or you may feel manic, not able to slow down. You feel like crying all the time, or want to cry but are not able to. You are irritable and cross with people you usually like.

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You are afraid that you will accidentally 'drop' your baby. If you are considering harming yourself or harming your baby go to see someone to talk about it sooner rather than later. However there is a difference between a fleeting thought of regret about having had a baby and actually contemplating this as an option.

You may feel nothing for your baby. This can sometimes happen if you have been separated after the birth, or if your baby was premature and some time in the intensive baby care unit, or if you expected a boy, but had a girl, or the other way round. You have no joy in holding and looking at your baby.

You cannot sleep, not because of the baby, but other thoughts that worry you, for instance your body, and how it has changed. You may feel anxious and have symptoms such as headaches, heart palpitations and so on.

You may have been depressed since before the birth.

You feel sad, guilty for not being happy and you have to pretend that you are happy, when you actually feel very different inside.

## **Reasons for postnatal depression**

There can be many different reasons for getting depressed after the birth of your baby. Here are some factors that have been found to contribute. But remember that if you had some of the following you will not necessarily develop postnatal depression. It may mean that you are more vulnerable and need to make extra arrangements to look after yourself.

### **Physical reasons**

You may suffer from lack of sleep, low levels of thyroid hormone or anaemia. You had a difficult pregnancy and birth, which left you feeling shattered and unsure of yourself as a parent.

### **History of depression**

You may have a history of depression in the family, or you have had depression yourself in the past. You suffer from low self esteem and don't feel good about yourself.

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## **Ghosts from the past**

You had traumas in your past, which you may have buried. Troubling memories are surfacing now; this could be past losses, like prior pregnancies, or the loss of a loved one.

## **Expectations**

The pregnancy had been planned for a very long time, needed IVF or egg donation, and now the present does not match up to your hopes. You may have unrealistic expectations of yourself and your surroundings.

## **Guilt**

The pregnancy may have been unwanted and now you feel guilty for having considered an abortion.

## **Disappointment**

You may have experienced a disappointment, such as having a caesarean birth, when you wanted a natural childbirth, a sense of feeling out of control during the birth and with your new baby.

## **Conflict**

You feel torn between how you were parented and what kind of parent you would like to be.

## **Isolation**

What makes things worse are major changes in your social circumstances, such as a recent house move and being a long way from family and friends which can contribute to you feeling alone and isolated.

## **Relationships**

Relationship problems with your partner can become another obstacle at times when you feel you need support, help and understanding. It may be difficult to communicate changed needs and concerns. Problems with the parents' generation, who as grandparents now take on a different role in your family, can also influence how you feel, wanting to please, wanting to be different, feeling criticised etc.

Other changes such as loss of career, financial independence, activities, friends, interests can also contribute to you feeling low.

## **Coping strategies**

There are different approaches to coping with postnatal illness.

### **Diet**

You may want to pay attention to eating a balanced diet. Your body has just undergone a significant change and you need to provide it with all of the necessary nutrients and vitamins. It can take a long time for your body to become stabilised again after pregnancy and childbirth. Also if you are breastfeeding it is necessary to consume more calories.

Keep your blood sugars up and eat! You may be so busy caring for your baby and family that you are putting your needs last. It will not be good for anyone (especially you) if you get sick and run down. Try and keep some foods handy that are easy to snack on such as fruit, cheese, bread, and vegetables.

### **Support groups**

Support groups for new mothers, such as run by local health visitors, NCT or community centres can be lifelines. Groups can become good sources of contact, help and encouragement and you can make new friends, since other mothers often feel quite similar to you. The problem is that when you feel bad inside yourself it is hard to make the effort.

### **Going for a walk**

Going out of the house once a day with your baby can be part of your strategy of making yourself and your baby feel better! You may like to walk with someone else.

### **Baby massage**

You could attend a baby massage group where you can experiment with ways of holding and touching your baby, to become more comfortable and in tune with each other. Research shows that massaged babies put on more weight and are easier to comfort. Baby massage can help you to bond with your baby and feel better about yourself as a mother.

### **Quality time with yourself**

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If it is possible spend an hour on your own, maybe to go swimming, do exercise or to have your hair done, to get a massage or just to have a bath, or a sleep. For this you need a trusted other with whom to leave your baby. This is a luxury not everyone has. It is important however to find some moments for yourself.

### **Small steps**

Give yourself permission to take one step at a time and set small goals. Try not to expect too much. Looking after a baby is demanding. You cannot predict what shape each day will take.

### **Talk to someone**

If you think you are depressed or unwell talk to someone as soon as possible about your feelings. Try not to delay it, since the longer you wait, the harder it can be. Maybe you could talk to your partner, mother, sister, friend, and if that does not work find a counsellor.

### **Parent – Infant Counselling**

Parent – infant counselling is based on the knowledge that the first few months and years in a mother and baby relationship are very important for the wellbeing of both mother and baby later on in life. That is why women should be enabled to seek support from a counsellor without it attaching stigma. Research confirms that women and babies benefited from meeting with older women, who are friendly, accepting and trained to listen to parents and babies. Your counsellor will together with you try to understand the roots of your problems and help you reflect on how you and your baby interact. The purpose of parent – infant counselling is that you are supported in changing unhelpful ways of being together. This approach does take time. However by talking about what bothers you with someone, you may be able to think about yourself and your baby in a new light.

### **Medication**

You can go to your GP and get medication, which may help you sleep, or reduce the anxiety. It is important however to remember that it will take some time to become effective. There may also be side effects on your body and if you are breast feeding this will influence your decision.

### **Whatever works for you**

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One approach is not better or exclusive of the other. They could all work well together. However different ways of coping suit different people. There is no one right way. Like with pregnancy and labour, what matters is what works for you.

## Useful contacts

- Mind Information Line  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) 08457 660163
- The Mental Health Foundation  
[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) 0207 802 0302
- Association for Postnatal Illness  
[www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org) 0207 386 0868
- NHS direct  
[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) 0845 4647
- Cry-sis: <http://www.cry-sis.org.uk/> 08451 228 669
- Home-start: trained volunteers, who come to your home to support you [www.home-start.org.uk](http://www.home-start.org.uk)  
0116 233 9955
- The Child Psychotherapy Trust: 0207 284 1355, [cpt@globalnet.co.uk](mailto:cpt@globalnet.co.uk)
- NCT [www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com](http://www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com) 08704 448707
- British Association for Counselling (will put you in contact with a local counsellor):  
[www.bacp.co.uk/](http://www.bacp.co.uk/) 01788 578 328/9
- SAMARITANS: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) 01753 532713
- United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapists:  
<http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk> 020 7014 9955
- Oxford Parent Infant Project  
[www.oxpip.org.uk](http://www.oxpip.org.uk) 01865 778034

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