

Postnatal depression

An 'invisible struggle' that affects as many as one in five women.

Imagine walking down your local high street and seeing a mum with a broken arm, struggling to push a pram. Imagine her trying to manoeuvre the pram and open a shop door at the same time. If you saw that mum, you would immediately rush to hold open the door.

Now imagine a mum with no visible signs of injury or illness, pushing her pram into a shop with seemingly little

effort. You might not even notice her. Yet she might be finding it a struggle just to walk down the high street. She might have postnatal depression.

Depression is a hidden illness. As a result, many women suffer in silence, without support. Postnatal depression may last for about three months - longer if it's left untreated - and it doesn't always begin immediately after the birth of a child.

Through a glass darkly

I didn't realise I was depressed until my son was about six months old and my first child was almost three. It was then that I began to find it difficult to go out socially. Sometimes I would just sit in a daze, hardly aware of what was going on around me - as if 'through a glass darkly'. I had two beautiful children, nothing was 'wrong', but I felt in the depths of despair. I didn't want to join in socially, yet longed to tell others how I was feeling. I would answer "Fine thanks, just a bit low" to any enquiries, while screaming inside.

Then, one morning, there was a guest speaker at our parent and toddler group, talking about postnatal

depression. I recognised myself in her words and before I knew it, I had rushed from the room. One of the group leaders followed me. She sat with me as I poured out my heart. She even cried with me, feeling my pain. That meant everything.

She immediately organised practical and emotional support, especially encouraging two other mums to get to know me. They really *listened*. I saw my GP and began slowly to get involved in life again. But it took a very long time. Now I am able to recognise the symptoms in others and try to help as I was helped.

Sarah

Hijacked by blue days

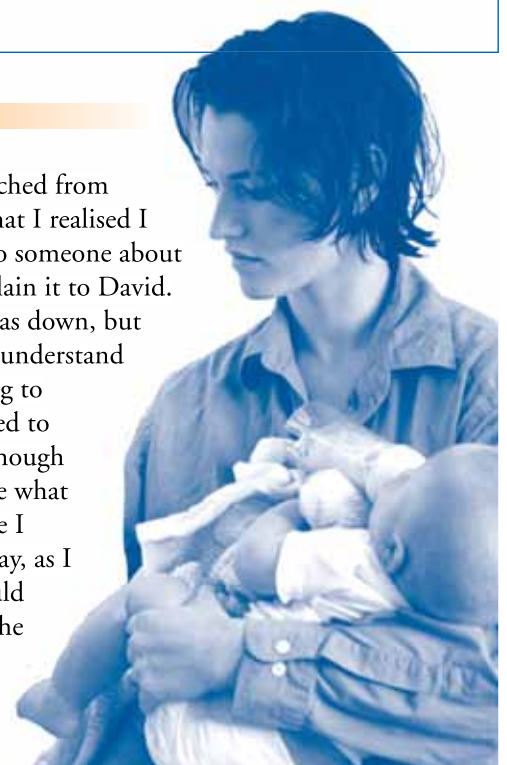
My maternity leave was fast drawing to a close. I thought I was coping well following Rachel's birth, but as I approached the countdown to returning to work, I found my mood swings were not so far apart. Blue days were becoming more regular and I would often be in tears.

Having been depressed in the past, I knew what signs to look for in myself. Somewhere I could 'taste' depression, but as yet it wasn't really tangible. I was sure it was outside pressures that were making me feel like this. I told myself that once I'd actually started work, the pressure would be off and I would be fine.

Around two weeks before returning to work, my blue days seemed to band together and hijack me! My emotions were all over the place, and it got to the stage where I was numb. I couldn't feel anything. I wasn't even sure that I loved my partner David any more (and he'd certainly done nothing to warrant the rejection).

I felt so detached from the real world that I realised I needed to talk to someone about it. I tried to explain it to David. He'd known I was down, but said he couldn't understand what I was trying to say. He continued to be supportive, though was often unsure what I needed because I often wouldn't say, as I thought he should already know. The complex mind of a woman!

Two days



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later I hit rock bottom and couldn't stop crying. I called a friend who had been in a similar situation. She came around straight away and we talked things through. I felt so relieved, hearing someone say that what I was going through was normal. Just talking seemed to lift the pressure.

A bouquet of flowers was delivered the next Monday morning. I thought I was about to be asked to take them in for a neighbour, but to my great surprise I found David had ordered them for me. I believe that was what I really needed at that time, and I was on cloud nine for about a week.

The day to return to work arrived all too soon. In fact, it wasn't as hard to leave Rachel as I had anticipated. David

leaves for work very early, but when I came down I found he'd left a card from Rachel to me, to encourage me and mark the day. Tears welled up then - as they did when I left her with Anne, our childminder. But when I left she was gazing happily at Anne's face, and was probably unaware of me leaving.

Before long I was much more balanced emotionally. I still had weepy days when I was very tired due to a bad night, but I suppose it's good to be able to express stress that way, rather than bottling it up and going under. It helps to have a couple of female friends to talk with as you realise you're not the only one going through it. *Janet*

A dad's view

Our son was eight months old when my wife, Sally, was diagnosed with postnatal depression. It came as a shock to me; I had been working away and it seemed to me that she was doing fine.

Looking back, I realise I should have seen the warning signs. Sally was very tired and seemed unable to cope with even the smallest thing. Our usually tidy house had become a mess. She cried constantly, lost weight, didn't sleep and refused to leave the house. She couldn't even go to the supermarket or see her friends. Gradually she became so withdrawn that she spoke to no-one.

Our health visitor mentioned her concern to me and we made an appointment to see the doctor. Sally was prescribed anti-depressants and the doctor suggested that somebody came to stay, to help her with Matthew. We were very fortunate that my parents could come, because it was another five months before Sally started to show signs of getting better.

I found things tough. I was used to living with a very capable wife and being able to get on with my job. I was

torn because I needed to work to pay the bills, but I was also aware that I needed to spend more time at home. I didn't find being sympathetic easy, but I had to try. I learned that simple things mattered, like giving Sally a bunch of flowers or a hug as soon as I arrived home from work. I tried to praise Sally and her efforts and, gradually, she got better.

I felt very isolated and that I had failed my family in some way. It wasn't easy to talk about my feelings, although our GP was great. When our third son was born five years later, the postnatal depression returned. I recognised the signs and was able to take Sally to the doctor straight away. She recovered much more quickly the second time, and has been fine ever since - our children are 15, 13 and 9 now!

My advice for any man going through this experience is to find somebody to talk to as it can be an isolating time. Also, your wife/partner will need all the support, help and love that you can give her. Fight her corner. She will come through and life will return to normal.

Tom

Recognising the symptoms of postnatal depression

In isolation, any of the following might just be the result of a long wakeful night or an 'off' day - everyone has them. But if a mother shows these signs for more than a week or two, help might be needed.

- Persistent sadness, tearfulness, obsessive behaviour or unreasonably high standards (for self or baby).
- Anxiety, irritability, withdrawal. Mums with postnatal depression are often unable to leave their baby with others, but also struggle to cope with the demands of caring for their baby.
- Dramatic weight loss or gain, comfort eating or disinterest in food.
- Low concentration, often finding even the simplest conversations difficult to follow.
- Lack of interest in themselves or their homes. Even the simplest task seems unachievable.



Show you care

How can you help a friend or relative who is suffering with postnatal depression?

- Give your **time** - the most important gift you can give.
- **Listen.** Let her tell you how she feels in her own way. You may need to listen to the same story many times before she has it in perspective.
- Read her body language. There may be things she feels she cannot say.
- Accept both good and bad feelings. Saying “you don’t really mean that” may make her keep that thought to herself in future. A bad feeling, unexpressed, could grow out of all proportion.
- Try not to be judgmental or dismissive. Saying “pull your socks up” is unhelpful, saying “everyone feels this way” is untrue.
- Treat her depression like any other illness. It may help to lessen the guilt about accepting extra help.
- Accept that it may be difficult for her to carry on as before.
- Show you care. Without feeling loved, she may find it hard to get better.
- Keep up the support and encourage her to hope for the future. Don’t ‘drop’ her when you feel she is getting a little better.
- Don’t forget the dads. They may well be feeling helpless - or even angry - at the change in their wife. Be prepared to offer a listening ear and appropriate practical help.

You can also offer to support your friend or relative in getting medical and physical help

- Encourage her to get help from a doctor or health visitor if she hasn’t already done so, maybe offer to go with her.
- Find out whether there is a postnatal depression support group in your area, and offer to make contact on her behalf.
- Many women who suffer from postnatal depression take some form of prescribed medication. Reassure her that she may need to try a few before she finds one that suits her.
- Encourage her to eat little and often. Long intervals without food can make her feel worse.
- Suggest to her that she takes exercise. Accompany her if she wishes you to. Exercise is difficult to fit into the everyday routine, but the benefits it brings to self confidence make it worthwhile. It is a great help for irritability and tension.
- Recommend to her that she takes some time for herself. It may be that shopping or a trip to the hairdressers will make a big difference. Tell her that putting herself first once in a while is a good thing. Taking time for her own needs will usually make her feel less stressed and more able to cope. Anything that can raise her self-esteem and make her feel good about herself will benefit the whole family.

How can partners help?

A husband’s/partner’s support can make a great difference to a woman suffering with postnatal depression.

- Try to be patient.
- Let her express her true feelings and treat them with sympathy.
- Be aware that sometimes it doesn’t help to try to reason with her.
- Remember that she is your partner and not just the mother of your baby.
- Take her out without the baby/children. But don’t try and force her into doing anything she doesn’t feel ready for.
- Help with the baby/children as much as possible.
- Show her - and tell her - that you still love her.
- Don’t ignore your own feelings. It’s OK for you to ask for help too. Your GP, midwife or health visitor will be happy to talk to you.

Moving forward

While I was recovering from postnatal depression, my health visitors invited me to a postnatal depression study day. There were several guests from the health and voluntary sector, including MIND.

A year and a half later (by which time I had moved to a new area), I was invited back to talk at a conference about my experience. I was asked to speak for ten minutes on surviving postnatal depression. This was difficult, but it touched some of the audience. One lady later told me she had been ill 20 years ago and not told anyone! I feel that having the opportunity of talking at this conference in some way raised awareness of postnatal depression and has made me a stronger person.

I found I was able to survive postnatal depression and go on with my life.

I have now become involved with the local branch of the National Childbirth Trust as a Postnatal Support Co-ordinator.

I have telephone contact with pregnant women and new mums, and give them the opportunity to meet for coffee and a chat in small numbers at my house. I also put a person suffering from postnatal depression in touch with someone who has come through the illness.

I am fine now. With help from the book, *Depression after Childbirth* by Dr Katrina Dalton, and from my GP, I found I was able to survive postnatal depression and go on with my life. *Sue*

Forms of postnatal illness

The mildest and most short-lived postnatal illness is known as 'baby blues' and the most severe is puerperal psychosis. Between these two extremes lies postnatal depression (PND) which can vary in severity.

Baby blues

Many women have mood swings after having a baby. One minute they feel happy - the next minute they are in tears. They sometimes feel 'down' and have a hard time concentrating. They lose their appetite and find that they have difficulty sleeping even when the baby is sleeping. For these women their symptoms show themselves three to four days after the birth of the baby and can last for several days.

The 'baby blues' are considered a normal part of early motherhood and usually disappear within ten days of the baby being born. If the symptoms persist and last longer than around ten days, postnatal depression may be diagnosed.

Puerperal psychosis

Puerperal psychosis is the most severe form of postnatal mental illness and various research studies have shown it affects between one in 500 and one in 1,000 mothers. Symptoms of puerperal psychosis are often not spotted until the mother's behaviour becomes extreme.

This acute mental illness usually comes on suddenly within the first few weeks, and frequently within the first 10 days after the birth of a child. Occasionally, onset may be more gradual.

The symptoms vary. Some women may become manic - excited, elated, uninhibited, intensely over-active and over-talkative. Others may be depressed, but much more severely

than mothers with postnatal depression. They often show signs of confusion, delusions, unresponsiveness and inability to concentrate. Feelings of guilt, inadequacy and shame may lead to suicidal thoughts.

In severe cases, the mother will usually be admitted to hospital for around six to eight weeks. Treatment could involve drugs, ECT (electro-convulsive therapy), hormone therapies, relaxation and occupational therapy. Because women who have suffered from puerperal psychosis are at much greater risk of suffering from another puerperal psychosis after a subsequent pregnancy, they should seek advice before attempting to have another baby.



Extra help

Support groups

National Childbirth Trust (NCT)

Alexandra House, Oldham Terrace,
Acton, London W3 6NH

Tel: 0300 33 00 770

Website: www.nct.org.uk

The NCT central office will give you details of a local branch, which in turn can put you in touch with another mother to whom you can talk. It may also run a postnatal depression support group.

The Association for Postnatal Illness (APNI)

145 Dawes Road, Fulham, London SW6 7EB

Tel: 020 7386 0868

Website: www.apni.org

A network of phone and postal volunteers who have had - and recovered from - postnatal depression.

Newpin (part of Family Action)

Family Action Central Office

501-505 Kingsland Road

London

E8 4AU

Tel: 020 7254 6251

Website: www.family-action.org.uk

Bookshelf

Depression after Childbirth

Katrina Dalton with Wendy M Holton,

Oxford University Press

ISBN 0192632779