

Depression and Anxiety: What do women and their families need to know?

Up to 20% of all women experience some depression or anxiety in pregnancy or in the first year after birth. You might not have any lasting depression. If you do feel down, angry, confused, or anxious, start talking about it as soon as you feel able. The sooner you reach out to supportive people the sooner you will feel better. There are many resources to help you understand and recover from depression or anxiety. At your next healthcare appointment or birth class, ask your provider for a list of resources so that you will have it if you need it. Contact Postpartum Support International at www.postpartum.net or 1.800.844.4PPD for helpful links or resources near you.

If you do become depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed, remember that there are resources and support that will help you recover, no matter how bad you might feel at first. Women have different experiences and symptoms of depression and anxiety. There are several different kinds of postpartum reactions, which are sometimes called perinatal mood disorders (PMDs). You might have one or more of these symptoms: sadness, anxiety, exhaustion, numbness, anger, physical symptoms, confusion, insomnia, or disturbing thoughts or fears. You might have only anxiety, only depression, or a mix of symptoms. None of us expects to have them, but none of us needs to be unprepared for them.

If you do have symptoms, don't wait for your checkup to talk to your practitioner. Call them now with your questions. Make an appointment and really let them know how you are feeling. Every pregnant or new mom needs to rest, eat well, get emotional support, and take breaks. Cultures that support new moms, allowing them rest and recuperation, have less postpartum depression. Traditional cultures provide the support of the village for new parents; modern culture tends to encourage isolation and self-reliance. This makes it hard for mothers to take care of themselves. Find people to talk to, and people who can give practical support, and let them help. You will recover better if you get both practical and emotional support. Get extra support, especially if you find you have a hard time coping with your moods or the baby. Getting breaks from baby care is not a luxury -- it is a necessity for all mothers.

All of the symptoms of pregnancy or postpartum mood disorders are temporary and treatable. Some women treat depression and anxiety with medication, some with natural remedies, some with diet and exercise, some with counseling, support groups, or spiritual practice and support. Many use all of them. Find what works best for you, make a plan of self-care, and stick to it.

Learn about how to cope with depression and anxiety, and keep reaching out until you find the help you need. Make calls, read what feels helpful, talk to women who have recovered. Pace yourself as you gather information. If you feel overloaded, take a break from the input -- but not from support.

Considering that about one in five women become depressed during pregnancy or postpartum, it seems that you should have heard more about it by now. Because people hesitate to talk about it, many women end up feeling embarrassed and scared that they are alone. You are not alone. There are informed people to talk to who will support you and help you. It may be hard at first, but your greatest achievement may be learning to reach out.

Risk factors include previous PMS or reaction to birth control pills, stress and isolation, and a personal or family history of depression, anxiety, manic-depressive illness or PPD. It is not a failure to be depressed or anxious. Ease up on your expectations of yourself. Moms with depression often hinder their recovery because they feel guilty and then over-do it, neglecting their own needs. Find your own way to take care of yourself as a mother, and learn to honor it.

Having pregnancy or postpartum depression does not mean that you are failing as a mother or that you will always feel depressed about being a mother. It does mean that you are going to recover from a challenging, temporary condition that will teach you a great deal about yourself, the strength of women, and the power of reaching out.

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