
The Physical You

During pregnancy, hormone levels are increased to assist in creating an environment for the growing fetus. In the postpartum period the mother's body experiences further dramatic changes in hormone levels which begin at the onset of labor. Within just twenty-four hours after birth, the progesterone and estrogen levels drop to a point *lower* than before conception. The physical strain from this sudden drop in hormone levels is further intensified by the complex changes the mother's body undergoes to prepare for milk production. With the common addition of broken sleep cycles, the stress on the mother's body is often overwhelming.



The Emotional You

With all the physical changes going on it is no surprise that there will be psychological changes as well. Each woman is affected differently by postpartum adjustment with symptoms ranging from mild to moderate to severe. The mild condition is commonly referred to as the "baby blues" and affects the largest percentage of postpartum women. The moderate condition is known as Postpartum Depression (PPD); and the severe form is called Postpartum Psychosis, a disease still undergoing extensive research. Regardless of how prepared you may be for the postpartum period, the responsibility and demands of caring for a tiny, new life twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week can leave a woman feeling depressed.



Postpartum Adjustment

This brochure is designed to help explain emotional changes often experienced during the postpartum adjustment period. A wide range of emotional reactions may occur due to changes in hormones, lifestyle and personal expectations. These feelings can best be dealt with if the mother is provided with an atmosphere of recognition and support.

For Fathers

Fathers often find that there are unexpected physical and emotional adjustments for them when having a baby. Although the man's body has not undergone the physical strain of pregnancy and birth he may experience his own form of exhaustion from the changes in household schedules, interrupted sleep, increased financial responsibilities, and concern for his partner's emotional and physical needs. Fathers are encouraged to share their feelings with their spouse and to seek professional assistance if necessary. Both mothers and fathers can feel guilty and disappointed if they are unable to fully enjoy this time. Additionally, fathers are often an important resource in assessing the mother's need for professional help.

The Baby Blues

A few days after birth, a woman frequently experiences a sense of disorientation. Often abrupt mood swings such as a feeling of elation, an emotional "high", are quickly followed by sadness, or an emotional "low". Some of the common emotional reactions are:

- a. Loneliness
- b. Sadness
- c. Low self-esteem
- d. Loss of identity
- e. Increased sensitivity and vulnerability
- f. Irritability
- g. Decreased sexuality

Although emotional responses characterized by the "baby blues" are considered to be very common, the postpartum woman should do her best to alleviate these symptoms. Sharing her feelings with her partner, other mothers, or professionals can often help.

Postpartum Depression

Some women suffer from emotional symptoms known as Postpartum Depression (PPD). Because these symptoms are less common and have been given little professional attention in the past, these women often feel extremely bewildered because they experience symptoms for which they are usually unprepared. Some of these symptoms are:

- a. High anxiety levels
- b. Deep despondency
- c. Insomnia
- d. Frequent crying
- e. Aversion to touching the baby
- f. A feeling of being "out of control"
- g. Fear of harming the baby

If you are experiencing any of these feelings it is important to seek professional help for treatment or for referral.

Getting Help

The best way to help yourself is to allow time to adjust and let all the different emotions find some form of expression. Taking good physical care of yourself is very important as well. A well-balanced diet and a daily exercise routine, even if it is a walk around the block, will add much to your positive state of well-being. It is equally important to have someone with whom you can talk openly. There is no substitute for sharing your feelings. However, if you feel that you are suffering from Postpartum Depression, it is vital that you seek professional assistance.

Postpartum Support

If you think you may be experiencing postpartum emotional symptoms that need professional assistance, please call:

The Santa Barbara Birth Resource Center
(805) 682-7529

Postpartum Education for Parents (PEP)
(805) 964-2009
(24-Hour Warm Line)

Additional resources for support and information in your community may be:

Childbirth Educators
County Health Care Department
Family Physicians
Local Hospitals
Mental Health Professionals
Midwives
Obstetricians
Parent Education Classes
Pediatricians
Social Service Organizations

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