

“This Should be the Happiest Time in My Life”-The Truth About Post Partum Disorders

by

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In my twenty years of practice and working with hundreds of new moms, I have seen a great deal of post partum depression and other disorders that can occur after the birth of a baby. With one well known celebrity having the honesty to publish her painful experience with post partum depression and another with unsubstantiated information attacking her for getting help, this disorder is suddenly back in the news. But new moms need to have the facts and the facts are that post partum disorders are real illnesses and require medical and or psychological treatment. Although the birth of a child is supposed to be a happy time, for at least one in ten new mothers, it may be just the opposite as they are suddenly overcome by feelings of depression or anxiety.

Baby Blues

The common and well known “*baby blues.*” are actually not considered a disorder. This commonly occurs in the first weeks following the birth of the baby and lasts only a few days. The mother finds herself feeling sad, irritable or confused and has crying spells, difficulty sleeping or loss of appetite. Symptoms are most intense within the first week after childbirth. This occurs in 10 -16% of new mothers and resolves without treatment. The cause is suspected to be hormonal (similar to premenstrual syndrome.) Although the baby blues will usually improve within a week to 10 days after delivery, a mother who is not feeling better after two weeks should discuss this with her doctor.

Postpartum Mood Disorders

There are now five well described post partum disorders that usually require some form of medical and/ or psychological treatment.

Depression and/ or anxiety can affect 10 - 20% of new mothers in some form during the first year and the severity of the depression varies from mild to severe. The symptoms of postpartum depression usually begin one to four months after delivery and may last up to one year if left untreated.

The symptoms of postpartum depression include the well-known signs of general depression. These include: overwhelming sadness, crying spells, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping and an inability to feel happy with the new baby or with other aspects of life. The symptoms of post partum anxiety are more subtle, and may include being overly concerned about the baby and the baby’s health, difficulty sleeping, and may include a sense of overwhelming uneasiness or panic attacks.

Panic Attacks. When these occur, the mother usually describes a feeling of impending doom, often accompanied by chest pain, shortness of breath, and/or rapid heart rate.

In more serious cases, a mother may show a lack of interest in the baby, or have fears of harming the baby or herself.

Post Partum Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is much less frequent occurring in about 3-5 % of mothers. Symptoms include intrusive, repetitive, and persistent thoughts or mental pictures which may include thoughts about hurting or killing the baby. These thoughts may be accompanied by behaviors to reduce the anxiety (for example, hiding knives) as well as repetitive behaviors such as counting, checking, and cleaning. Mothers will be horrified by these thoughts and very frightened by the possibility that they could hurt their baby.

Post Partum Psychosis is the most serious and the least frequent of these disorders and can include visual and or auditory hallucinations, delusional thoughts, delirium and even mania.

What causes post partum disorders?

The cause of postpartum depression is not well known. It is most likely related to a combination of hormonal and psychological factors. The stress of caring for a new baby only adds to the problem, as does sleep deprivation.

Many women do not seek help because they are ashamed that they are not experiencing the “joys of motherhood.” These women hide their symptoms, but continue to feel miserable inside. This disorder is treatable, and it is important to treat. Studies by the American Academy of Pediatrics have shown that newborns (and infants) are affected by a mother’s chronically depressed mood. If you experience any of the symptoms listed or you just don’t feel “right,” let your physician know. Tell your obstetrician, family practitioner or pediatrician.

Where can I find more information on postpartum depression?

www.depressionafterdelivery.com

(800) 944-4PPD

www.postpartum.net

Postpartum Support International

(805) 967-7636