The NATION'S HEALTH
November 2026

Postpartum depression: You are not alone

By Teddi Nicolaus

Your new baby is finally asleep. The house is quiet. But instead of feeling relaxed or happy, you feel sad. Or anxious. Or angry. Maybe you can't stop worrying that something terrible will happen. Perhaps you feel guilty because you don't feel the way you think you should.

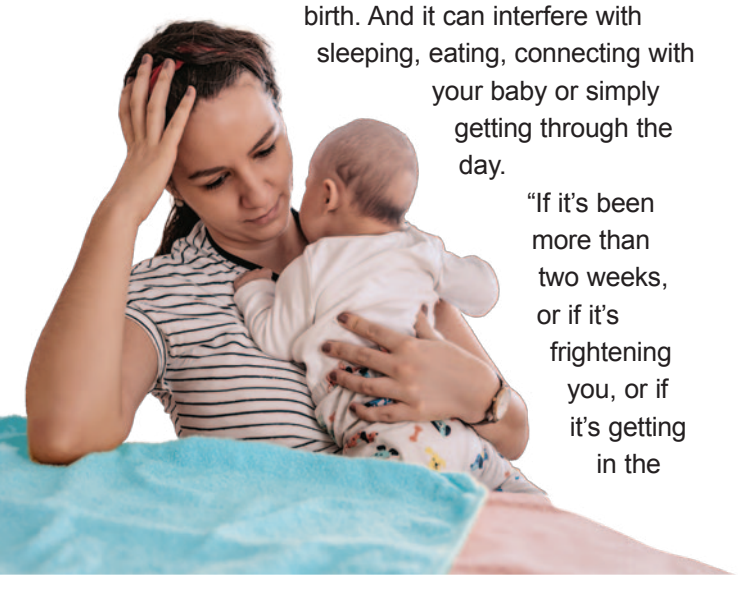
First, know this: You aren't the only one to feel this way. About 1 in 8 women experience postpartum depression after giving birth, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Yet many new parents are afraid to say how they really feel.

"We've built a story about new parenthood that has no room in it for suffering," says Wendy Davis, PhD, president and CEO of Postpartum Support International. "Everyone tells you this is the happiest time of your life — and then you're standing in the nursery at 3 in the morning feeling dread instead of joy, and the only conclusion you can draw is that something is wrong with you."

Shame can make it even harder to ask for help. Some people may worry that admitting how they feel means they are a bad parent or don't deserve to be one, Davis says. They may even fear that if they talk about frightening thoughts, someone will take their baby away.

Postpartum depression is not a sign that you're a bad person. It's a health condition that can be treated. It's also different from the "baby blues," which are extremely common during the first days after birth. With that condition, you may cry easily, feel overwhelmed or find that your emotions are all over the place. Usually those feelings begin to lift within two weeks.

Postpartum depression doesn't lift like the baby blues. It can begin during pregnancy or anytime during the first year after birth. And it can interfere with sleeping, eating, connecting with your baby or simply getting through the day.



"If it's been more than two weeks, or if it's frightening you, or if it's getting in the way of your life, or you just have questions — that's enough," Davis says. "You do not need a diagnosis to reach out for help."



Don't assume depression always looks like crying. Anger, irritability and even rage can be symptoms, Davis says. You may stop enjoying things you once loved or feel disconnected from your baby. You may feel guilty, ashamed or hopeless. Anxiety can bring constant worry, racing thoughts, panic attacks or the sense that something terrible is about to happen.

Some parents also experience frightening, unwanted thoughts or images about harm coming to their baby. Such intrusive thoughts can occur with anxiety, Davis says.

Having those experiences does not mean you want to hurt your baby. In fact, parents who experience them are typically terrified by them and hypervigilant about protecting their baby. Those thoughts are treatable and talking to a trained mental health provider can help you get better.

Don't wait to ask for help

Postpartum depression can happen to anyone — even someone who desperately wanted a baby or has plenty of support.

But your risk may be higher if you or someone in your family has a history of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder or bipolar disorder. Pregnancy complications, fertility problems, infant loss, financial or relationship stress, and not feeling supported can also raise your risk for postpartum depression.

If some of those sound familiar, don't wait for trouble. Talk about it now.

"Say it out loud to your provider while you're still pregnant," Davis says. "Make a plan before you need it."

And if you're struggling, you don't have to wait until it feels "bad enough" to ask for help. Tell your doctor, midwife, primary care provider or even your baby's pediatrician. If the first person you tell doesn't take you seriously, tell someone else. Keep inquiring until you're heard.

The people around a new parent should also step up and help. If someone you know has a new child, don't stop at "How's the baby?" Instead, ask: "How are you?" If the answer is "fine," Davis suggests gently trying again: "How are you sleeping, really? What's the hardest part of your day?" Then do something to help. Bring dinner. Hold the baby for a few hours so the parent can sleep. Drive them to an appointment.

And don't try to talk someone out of their feelings by reminding them to be grateful. Instead, listen. Remind them that postpartum depression is real and help is available. You can even sit beside them while they make the call.

And keep in mind that moms aren't the only ones who may struggle after a baby arrives. Dads and other parents can experience depression, too. Remember: Postpartum mental health is something the whole family should pay attention to.

"To the dads listening: the same thing is true for you," Davis says. "You are not alone, you are not to blame, and with help you will be well."

If you or someone you care about might be suffering from postpartum depression, free help is available. Call or text the Postpartum Support International helpline at 1-800-944-4773 or visit www.postpartum.net.



All images courtesy iStockphoto: Two women with baby, JackF; couple on couch, Prostock-Studio; woman with baby alone, Urbazon