



Melisa Schuster, LMSW

psychotherapy for the childbearing years

Postpartum Adjustment: A Guide for New Mothers

what to expect • how to thrive • when to seek help

Having a baby is a miraculous, life-transforming event in the life of a woman and her family. Becoming a parent can be joyful, exciting and an opportunity for growth and change.

The postpartum period—the weeks and months following the birth of a baby—can also be challenging, confusing, and a time of great physical and emotional adjustment.

“This isn’t what I expected.”

If you are like most women, you have spent months preparing for the birth of your child. You might expect that all of your preparations will make the postpartum period flow smoothly. For some women it does; for many, the postpartum period is full of unexpected challenges.

It’s no wonder postpartum can be a difficult time. In the first few weeks, a new mother is learning to meet the constant needs of a newborn who does not come with an instruction manual. At the same time, the mother is recovering from the physical and emotional demands of giving birth and may be exhausted from lack of sleep.

The Emotional Roller Coaster

Women experience a range of feelings in the postpartum period, from joy, elation and excitement to regret, dismay, exhaustion, confusion, and being overwhelmed. If the birth did not happen the way you had planned, you might feel disappointment, sadness, and anger. These feelings are often compounded by guilt because the message we frequently receive is that we should be happy and grateful if we have a healthy baby. The important thing to remember is that all of these feelings are normal and usually temporary; they are neither signs of bad mothering nor of going crazy.

Sixty to eighty percent of new mothers get the “baby blues”—the weepiness, irritability, and fatigue similar to PMS Symptoms—that are related to shifting hormones. The onset of the “baby blues” is usually three days postpartum and can last up to two weeks.

Ten to twenty percent of postpartum women experience a more serious reaction, commonly called postpartum depression. Postpartum depression is very treatable with therapy and sometimes with medication. In most cases breastfeeding does not have to be suspended in order to be treated with medications. In any case, the sooner you are treated, the sooner you feel better and can begin to enjoy motherhood.

Symptoms of Postpartum Depression include:

- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Loss of interest in the baby or usual activities
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Crying, tearfulness
- Isolation and withdrawal from others
- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Disturbing and intrusive thoughts

Becoming a Mother

It takes time for a new mother to learn how to care for her baby and to respond accurately to the baby's cues. With practice and patience women do become good mothers.

Some women say they fall in love with their babies at the moment of birth. For other mothers it takes weeks before they feel attached to and bonded with their babies. Spending time with and caring for your baby creates attachment.

Women who are used to having life organized and predictable are often surprised at how chaotic life can be with a newborn. For women who are used to feeling competent in the workplace, finding yourself feeling like a novice can be jarring.

Many new mothers experience a sense of loss after the baby arrives: loss of time and energy, loss of a stable identity, loss of a spontaneous lifestyle. These feelings are normal but often are not talked about. It's okay to grieve these losses; in fact, it frees up your emotional energy to do so.

Women today often have a desire for rewarding work and an enriching family life and to find a balance between the two. Because of the common expectation that women can or should have it all, they sometimes experience feelings of guilt, ambivalence, or inadequacy. New mothers sometimes feel isolated and lonely. The extra effort it takes to reach out to other new and experienced parents is well worth it.

During this transition, it is important to remember:

- Seek support from those with similar circumstances
- Keep your expectations realistic
- It's okay to have bad days
- You don't have to do everything by yourself or perfectly

Relationship Changes

When a baby is born, the couple becomes a family. This transition requires some role shifts and changes in expectations. Those couples who report an increase in marital satisfaction after the birth of a baby are the ones who are able to surrender their individual goals and needs in order to work together as a team, and to resolve differences about division of household chores and work in a mutually satisfactory manner.

The most common sources of conflict and stress in a relationship after the baby is born are:

- Division of household labor
- Work outside the home
- Money
- Social life (i.e. are we getting out enough?)
- Feeling disconnected, lonely, and stressed in the relationship

Women often find they have a lower sex drive after the birth of a baby. This is in large part due to hormones, fatigue and feeling "touched out" after a full day of baby care. Ease back into sexual activity (wait to resume intercourse until after 6 weeks postpartum), be creative in meeting one another's' needs, and keep the lines of communication open. Be assured it is possible to resume a normal sexual life.

The Premature or Ill Newborn

The vast majority of babies are born healthy and without complications. But sometimes babies are born prematurely or with a birth defect requiring hospitalization or intensive care. At these times, parents often feel frightened, worried, and grief-stricken.

Stay as involved in your baby's care as is medically possible. Your baby will benefit from your love and your touch. Bonding is not a one-time opportunity, and you will be able to develop a healthy attachment between you over time.