

Postpartum Depression: Don't Dismiss Anxiety

By Lauren Culp, M.A., MFT

I have worked with moms and newborns with various postpartum adjustments for more than 15 years as a licensed marriage and family therapist, as a certified postpartum and birth doula (a companion for women about to give birth who dispenses knowledge, emotional support, encouragement and wisdom through labor, birth and beyond) and as an educator. Often, I make house calls to families with newborns to provide various kinds of support. What I have found is that many new mothers feel high levels of fear and anxiety, but they won't seek treatment because they cannot identify themselves as having "postpartum depression." Awareness about postpartum depression is growing. Many professionals use this term to identify the mood disorders of new mothers. Others, like myself, who actually work with these mothers try to identify this hormonally imbalanced state as a perinatal mood or health disorder. Anxiety is a dominant condition, but, unfortunately, not well recognized, leaving many women confused about their experience. Mothers often report feeling overwhelmed by daily chores and tasks. They worry about caring for the baby and its safety, about being alone, making meals, and doing laundry.

■ Both parents impacted

Postpartum mood disorders are an issue for both parents. When the pregnancy proceeds smoothly, there is an expectation of much joy when the baby is born (though most new parents expect to lose some sleep). But a new father often experiences complex feelings in his new role and can be confused by his wife's state. Women often fear abandonment by the husband or partner, rejection from the baby, and loss of the self that used to be able to multi-task. Of the approximately 4 million births that occur annually in the United States, about 40% are complicated by some type of postpartum mood disorder, according to M.W. O'Hara in "Postpartum Depression: Causes and Consequences" (1995). Medical researchers are exploring why some women may be at risk for experiencing the psychological, physiological, and hormonal changes that result in postpartum mood disorders. Those with a personal or family history of depression or bipolar disorder may be susceptible. Others who experience a difficult delivery, illness, lack of social or familial support, or marital, economic, or social problems also may be at risk. Birth is an important initiation. A birth plan alone does not ensure an optimum birth. In fact, it can mislead a woman or couple into expecting a supportive nurturing experience. During pregnancy and birth, women seem to benefit most from a supportive community of other women who've had positive birth experiences and can provide support during the delivery for both parents, according to Peggy O'Mara, editor and publisher of *Mothering Magazine* and www.Mothering.com.

■ How to cope

In her book "Mother Daughter Wisdom" (2005), Dr. Christiane Northrup suggests that taking DHA (500 mgs. twice a day) and using natural progesterone after delivery would reduce the incidence of postpartum mood disorders. Before taking any natural supplements, always consult your doctor or medical professional, and ask to have your thyroid checked.

Even when there are no obvious difficulties - breastfeeding is successful and the baby sleeps well - some well-adjusted women still experience postpartum mood disorders due to hormonal imbalances after the delivery. New mothers can benefit from discussing the birth and early adjustment period with a knowledgeable professional. Support for new families is important. Good nutrition is essential. Bodywork or massage helps any woman, but can particularly provide a welcome grounding effect to a new mother. With the consent of the OBGYN, gentle exercise can benefit the mother as well.

■ In home care

For those who can afford in-home help, The Chapman Family Center of Santa Monica at (310) 453-5144 has a birth doula and a postpartum doula registry. A postpartum doula can provide immediate in-home services to a new mother. Outside the Los Angeles area, you can contact Doulas of North America (www.dona.org). Family members and friends can help by bringing food to the new family, doing errands, or by volunteering to stay with the newborn while the mother rests or seeks professional care. Mothers who continue to have symptoms of anxiety, restlessness,

sleeplessness (even though exhausted), excessive crying, or scary thoughts, should seek counseling. A mental health professional can provide helpful step-by-step tools to help the mother get through the day and evening. A medical evaluation by a psychiatrist or referral by an OBGYN to a psychiatrist, with individualized follow-up medication adjustments, also can be an important step. Note, there are medications that can be taken while breastfeeding.

Immediate support and sound professional care will benefit the baby, and help you and your partner to recover, and then discover the joy of being parents

About the Author

Lauren Martin Culp, M.A., LMFT, has a private psychotherapy practice in Santa Monica specializing in prenatal, postpartum health, and fertility issues, grief and loss, anxiety, depression, addictions and parenting issues. Culp is a birth and newborn specialist, and regularly makes home visits to families with newborns .Culp is a board member of the Global Association of Interpersonal Neurobiology Studies and a member of the Association of Pre and Perinatal Health and Psychology, Postpartum International, CTA, and CAMFT. Learn more about Lauren Martin Culp at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/LaurenMartin-Culp>