

Baby Blues

Dr. Matt Sanders

For first-time parents, the arrival of a healthy bouncing baby into the household doesn't always herald endless unbridled joy. Childbirth is physically demanding, babies require lots of attention, and household routines are radically altered.

Even experienced mothers are not immune to mixed feelings about their new baby, as many as two-thirds of all mothers feel emotionally fragile or numb in the first 10 days after childbirth.

The so-called "baby blues" usually appears around the third day after childbirth and is typified by tearful and easily upset mothers.

At this time, both mothers and fathers should be aware of the adjustments that need to be made and pay attention to their own feelings and behavior as well as those of their partner.

The exact cause of baby blues most probably stems from a combination of tiredness, the stress of childbirth and hormonal changes. The feelings are mild, pass quickly and do not require any treatment.

The extent to which a mother may feel sad or down may however be affected by such issues as:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of a new baby at home, as well as family demands and household chores;
- Finding parenthood is not what was expected;
- Lack of contact with other adults;
- Loss of your old lifestyle; and
- Unhappiness over how you look.

It is therefore important not to forget in those first few days back at home, that one of the best ways to help your baby and yourself feel comfortable is to make sure you look after yourself. Try to be realistic about just how many extra household tasks can be achieved in a day when the demands of your baby will keep you busy enough. Put off difficult jobs for a while, and take time to develop new routines.

When your baby is asleep, try to rest as well. Even half an hour a day relaxing doing something you enjoy, such as reading a magazine or taking a bath can make the world of difference. If you have a partner, ask them to look after the baby for half an hour or so to help give you a break, and remember to also arrange time alone with your partner — your relationship is important to all the family. If you have older children, they too will need some special time just with mom and dad.

For most parents who experience the baby blues, the feelings pass quickly, and with care and support, no long-term effects occur. In some cases however, a more lasting depression develops that is severe enough to interfere with daily activities and runs for more than two weeks. This is called postnatal depression and affects up to one in five mothers.

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Depression drains you of energy, confidence and enjoyment. Mothers suffering postnatal depression may find themselves unable to gain any pleasure from tending to their baby's physical needs and feel resentment toward them. Depressed mothers often feel ashamed — that somehow they are the only ones who cannot cope with being a parent.

Many mothers and their family and friends don't recognize postnatal depression when it occurs. Even if you are not sure if you have postnatal depression, it is best to talk with a professional, such as your doctor, as soon as you begin to feel overwhelmed. Early treatment and support will help you get over any depression and get on to enjoying family life.

Dr. Matthew Sanders is a clinical psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and founder of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program.

For local resources on Positive Parenting support for common behavior issues such as tantrums, whining, disobedience, bedtime problems and more contact Raise & Shine at 707-462-1233 or visit www.raiseandshine.org for a schedule of free workshops, classes and private consultations in your area.

