The Baby Blues

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I remember when I was lying in my hospital bed after the birth of my fourth child, Coleton. I had endured a full day of labor and a difficult delivery (who says the fourth one comes easily?), and I was tired beyond explanation. After the relief of seeing my precious new child came an uncontrollable feeling to close my eyes and sleep. As my husband cradled newborn Coleton, I drifted off; my parting thoughts were, "I can't do this. I don't have the energy. How will I ever take care of a baby?" Luckily for me, a few hours of sleep, a supportive family, and lucky genes were all it took to feel normal again. But as many as 80% of new mothers experience a case of the baby blues that lasts for weeks after the birth of their baby. This isn't something new mothers can control there's no place for blame. The most wonderful and committed mothers, even experienced mothers of more than one child, can get the baby blues.

What are baby blues?

Your baby's birth has set into motion great changes in your body and in your life, and your emotions are reacting in a normal way. Dramatic hormonal shifts occur when a body goes from pregnant to not pregnant in a manner of minutes. Add to this your new title (Mommy!) and the responsibilities that go with it, and your blues are perfectly understandable. You're not alone; this emotional letdown during the first few weeks is common after birth. Just remember that your state of mind has a physical origin and is exacerbated by challenging circumstances and you and your body will adjust to both soon.

How do I know if I have the baby blues?

Every woman who experiences the baby blues (also called postpartum blues) does so in a different way. The most common symptoms include:

- Anxiety and nervousness
- Sadness or feelings of loss
- Stress and tension
- Impatience or a short temper
- Bouts of crying or tearfulness
- Mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Trouble sleeping or excessive tiredness
- Not wanting to get dressed, go out, or clean up the house

Could it be more than just the baby blues?

If you're not sure whether you have the blues ask your doctor or midwife, and don't feel embarrassed: This is a question that health care providers hear often and with good reason. If you're feeling these symptoms to a degree that disrupts your normal level of function, if your baby is more than a few weeks old, or if you have additional symptoms particularly feelings of resentment or rejection toward your baby or even a temptation to harm him you may have more than the blues, you may have postpartum

depression. This is a serious illness that requires immediate treatment. Please call a doctor or professional today. If you can't make the call, then please talk to your partner, your mother or father, a sibling or friend and ask them to arrange for help. Do this for yourself and for your baby. If you can't talk about it, hand this page it to someone close to you. It's that important. You do not have to feel this way, and safe treatment is available, even if you're breastfeeding.

How can I get rid of the blues?

While typical baby blues are fairly brief and usually disappear on their own, you can do a few things to help yourself feel better and get through the next few emotional days or weeks:

Give yourself time.

Grant yourself permission to take the time you need to become a mother. Pregnancy lasts nine months, the adoption process can take even longer, and your baby's actual birth is only a moment but becoming a mother takes time. Motherhood is an immense responsibility. In my opinion, it is the most overwhelming, meaningful, incredible, transforming experience of a lifetime. No wonder it produces such emotional and physical change!

No other event of this magnitude would ever be taken lightly, so don't feel guilty for treating this time in your life as the very big deal it is. Remind yourself that it's okay (and necessary) to focus on this new aspect of your life and make it your number-one priority. Tending to a newborn properly takes time all the time in his world. So, instead of feeling guilty or conflicted about your new focus, put your heart into getting to know this new little person. The world can wait for a few weeks.

Consider as objectively as you can just what you have accomplished: You have formed a new, entire person inside your own body and brought him forth; you have been party to a miracle. Or, if you've adopted, you've chosen to invite a miracle into your life and became an instant mother. You deserve a break and some space in which to just exist with your amazing little one, unfettered by outside concerns.

Talk to someone who understands.

Talk to a sibling, relative or friend with young children about what you are feeling. Someone who has experienced the baby blues can help you realize that they are temporary, and everything will be fine. A confidante can also serve as a checkpoint who can encourage you to seek help if he or she perceives that you need it.

Reach out and get out.

Simply getting out (if you are physically able and okayed for this by your health care provider) and connecting with people at large can go a long way toward reorienting your perspective. Four walls can close in very quickly, so change the scenery and head to the mall, the park, the library, a coffeehouse whatever place you enjoy. You'll feel a sense of pride as strangers ooh and ahh over your little one, and your baby will enjoy the stimulation, too.

Join a support group.

Joining a support group, either in person or online, can help you sort through your feelings about new motherhood. Take care to choose a group that aligns with your core beliefs about parenting a baby. As an example, if you are committed to breastfeeding, but most other members of the group are bottlefeeding, this may not be the best place for you, since your breastfeeding issues won't be understood and you won't find many helpful ideas among this group. If you have multiples, a premature baby, or a baby with special needs, for example, seek out a group for parents with babies like yours. And within those parameters, look for a group with your same overall parenting beliefs. Just because you all have twin babies doesn't mean you will all choose to parent them in the same way, so try to find like-minded new friends.

Tell Daddy what he can do to help.

It's very important that your spouse or partner be there for you right now. He may want to help you, but he may be unsure of how. Here are a few things that he can do for you show him this list to help him help you:

- Understand. It's critical that your spouse or partner feel that you understand that she is going through a hormonally driven depression that she cannot control and that she is not "just being grumpy." Tell her you know this is normal, and that she'll be feeling better soon. Simply looking over this list and using some of the ideas will tell her a lot about your commitment to (and belief in) her.
- Let her talk about her feelings. Knowing she can talk to you about her feelings without being judged or criticized will help her feel much better.
- Tend to the baby. Taking care of your baby so Mommy can sleep or take a shower can give her a breath of fresh air. Have her nurse the baby and then you can take him for a walk (using a sling will keep Baby happy) or go on an outing. A benefit for you is that most babies love to be out and about and will enjoy this special time with you.
- Step in to protect her. If she's overwhelmed with visitors, kindly explain to company that she needs a lot of rest. Help her with whatever household duties usually fall to her (or get someone to help her) and do what you can to stay on top of yours. Worry about the house's cleanliness or laundry upkeep will do her no good whatsoever. If relatives offer to take the baby for a few hours, or to help with the house, take them up on it.
- Tell her she's beautiful. Most woman feel depressed about the way they look after childbirth because most still look four months pregnant! After changing so greatly to accommodate a baby's development, a woman's body takes months to regain any semblance of normalcy. Be patient with both her body and her feelings about it. Tell her what an amazing thing she's accomplished. Any compliments that acknowledge her unique beauty are sure to be greatly appreciated!

- Tell her you love the baby. Don't be bashful about gushing over the baby. Mommy loves to hear that you're enraptured with this new little member of your family.
- Be affectionate, but be patient about sex. With all that she's struggling with physically and emotionally, weeks may pass before she's ready for sex (even if she's had an OK after her checkup.) That doesn't mean she doesn't love you or need you she just needs a little time to get back to the physical aspects of your sexual relationship.
- Tell her you love her. Even when she isn't feeling down, she needs to hear this and right now it's more important for her health and well-being than ever.
- Get support for you, too. Becoming a father is a giant step in your life. Open up to a friend about how it feels to be a Dad, and do things that you enjoy, too. Taking care of yourself will help you take care of your new family.

Accept help from others.

Family and friends are often happy to help if you just ask. When people say, "Let me know if I can do anything" they usually mean it. So, go ahead and ask kindly for what you want, whether it's watching your baby so that you can nap, taking your older child to the park, helping you make a meal, or doing some laundry.

Get some sleep.

Right now, sleeplessness will enhance your feelings of depression. So, take every opportunity to get some shuteye. Nap when the baby sleeps, go to bed early, and sleep in later in the morning if you can. If you are co-sleeping, take advantage of this special time when you don't have to get up out of bed to tend to your baby. And if your baby's sleep patterns are distressing to you then reach out to an experienced parent for help, or check out my book The No-Cry Sleep Solution: Gentle Ways to Help Your Baby Sleep Through the Night.

Don't fret about perfection right now.

Household duties are not your top priority now in fact, nothing aside from getting to know your baby is. Remember that people are coming to see your baby, not your house, so enjoy sharing your baby with visitors without worrying about a little clutter or dust. Simplify, prioritize, and delegate routine tasks, errands, and obligations.

Enjoy your job.

If you work outside the home, then view your time at your job as an opportunity to refresh and prepare yourself to enjoy your baby fully when you are at home. Go ahead talk about your baby and share pictures with your co-workers. Chances are, they'll love to hear about your new little one. This is a nice and appropriate way of indulging your natural instincts to focus on your baby when you can't be with her.

Get into exercising.

With your health care provider's approval, start exercising with short walks or swims. Exercise will help you feel better in many ways both physical and emotional. Even if you didn't exercise before you had your baby, this is a great time to start. Studies prove that regular exercise helps combat depression, and it will help you regain your pre-baby body much more quickly.

Eat healthful foods.

When the body isn't properly nourished, spirits can flag particularly when the stress of recovery makes more nutritional demands. If you are breastfeeding, a nourishing diet is important for both you and your baby. Healthful foods, eaten in frequent meals, can provide the nutrition you need to combat the baby blues and give you the energy you need to handle your new role. And don't forget to drink water and other healthy fluids, especially if you're nursing! Dehydration can cause fatigue and headaches.

Take care of yourself.

Parenting a new baby is an enormous responsibility, but things will fall into place for you and everything will seem easier given time. During this adjustment phase, try to do a few things for yourself. Simple joys like reading a book, painting your nails, going out to lunch with a friend or other ways in which you nourish your spirit can help you feel happier.

Love yourself.

You are amazing: You've become mother to a beautiful new baby. You've played a starring role in the production of an incredible miracle. Be proud of what you've accomplished, and take the time to know and enjoy the strong, capable, multifaceted person you are becoming.

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