

Steps for Recovery: Surviving Postpartum Depression

“I didn’t know postpartum depression was so common.”

First Step: Learn all you can about postpartum depression:

- Reading books, articles, watching videos, internet searches, information given in childbirth classes and from the hospital.
- Talk to your healthcare provider and other professionals. If you think something is wrong, it probably is. Trust your instincts.
- Be aware that 10-20 percent of women experience postpartum depression, over 400,000 women per year.
- Postpartum depression can occur anytime within the first year after childbirth. In the weeks after the baby is born, there seems to be a risk for becoming depressed that is greater than at other times in a woman’s life.
- Postpartum depression is one of the most treatable and curable forms of depression. Treatment includes self-help, medication, counseling, and support.
- With proper treatment you will feel better again. The longer you wait, the longer it will take to get better.
- Know that postpartum depression may be caused by a chemical or hormonal imbalance that causes psychological and emotional symptoms.
- Begin to accept that you have an illness that is treatable and take the steps necessary for recovery.

“If only I could get a good night’s sleep, I’d feel better.”

Second Step: Get adequate Sleep: This means at least 4-5 hours of uninterrupted sleep per night. Persistent lack of sleep will negatively affect every area of your life.

- If able, nap when the baby sleeps, even during the day.
- Arrange help during the night with infant care. If breastfeeding, offer stored milk or use formula.
- When napping turn off the phone.
- If it is a choice between housework and rest...choose rest. A messy house never hurt anyone but lack of sleep can.
- If you are having trouble falling asleep a warm relaxing bath and warm milk can help. Avoid caffeine and sugar foods before bed. Ask someone to give you a massage. Moist heat on neck and shoulders can be relaxing.
- Having the baby sleep in a separate room may help so you can sleep more restfully.
- When you rest, try to make your room as comfortable as possible. Consider the noise and temperature. Draw the shades. Earplugs may help.
- Music can be soothing and restful. Relaxation and deep breathing exercises can be helpful.
- Consistent physical and or emotional pain can cause fatigue and lack of energy. If you are sleeping too much you may be trying to escape this pain.

- If you are experiencing sleep problems these suggestions may help but please let your health provider know what you are going through. You may benefit from medication to help out.

“I don’t feel like eating, I really just don’t have an appetite.”

Third Step: Continue the healthful eating habits you established during pregnancy.

- When you don’t feel like eating, six smaller meals/snacks per day can be more manageable.
- If you find you are eating more than normal, make nutritious choices.
- Avoid high sugar, empty calories and caffeine.
- Continue taking your prenatal vitamin or a good quality multi-vitamin daily.
- Omega-3 fatty acids (fish oil supplements) and vitamin B complex have both been shown to improve mood.
- Putting the baby in a swing or a bouncy chair during meals can keep him occupied so you can enjoy your meal.
- When shopping, purchase snack foods that are nutritious and don’t require a lot of time to prepare, i.e. cheese chunks, yogurt, granola bars, fruits, pre-cut vegetables, and nuts.
- Drink plenty of water, milk, juice, or decaffeinated drinks. Avoid soda pop.

“I just feel so over-whelmed.”

Fourth Step: You need help! It is unrealistic to think you can do everything you normally did before the baby arrived. Setting new priorities and simplifying your life is essential to well-being.

- Make your needs known. Let others know what you need because they genuinely want to help but don’t always know how.
- Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength.
- Don’t feel obligated to entertain your visitors. Be firm in setting boundaries for when and how long you wish to have guests. Be assertive.
- Housework should not be the top priority now. Enlist the help of others to assist with the dishes, laundry, and day-to-day cleaning. Making a list of what needs to be done will be helpful for others to refer to.
- Keep your expectations realistic. Put aside the list of tasks you expected to accomplish while you are on maternity leave. Don’t over commit or feel like you have to be a super woman, but don’t totally give up activities that you enjoy.
- Set small goals for yourself and be proud as you meet them.
- Caring for a baby is hard work. At the end of the day a happy, well-fed baby is something to feel good about regardless of how much else you accomplished.
- If you are breastfeeding assess your attitudes. Keep an open mind. Do what is most comfortable for YOU.
- Set a flexible schedule that meets you and your families needs. Don’t worry about pleasing others at your own expense.

- Meal planning and preparation is a big job. Simplify by ordering take-out when needed, asking others to help arrange meals and assist with shopping. Simple meals can both be nutritious and convenient.
- Enlist the help of others for running errands and help with older children.
- Remember that you are not alone. Raising a baby and all that goes with it can not fall totally on one person.
- Let someone else help you make decisions.
- Postpone major life changes. Unless you have no other choice, don't attempt such major decisions as buying a new home, or taking a new job until you feel more in control of the rest of your life. This goes for new fathers too.
- Take one day at a time.

“It feels like no one understands what I am going through.”

Fifth Step: Find non-judgmental support.

- Share your feelings with someone close to you. Confide in someone you trust.
- Avoid people who make you feel bad about yourself.
- Be careful asking too many people for advice. Do what you know is right for you and your family. Trust your instincts.
- Let your partner know how you are really feeling.
- Don't isolate yourself from others. Talk with at least one other adult during the day.
- Make an effort to meet other women with young children to share your concerns, challenges, and successes. You will find that many of them share the same experiences that you are going through. For example, go to the park or playground in your neighborhood and start up a conversation with another mother.
- Be kind to yourself. Talking negatively about yourself will bring you down. Don't compare yourself with others.
- Remind yourself that all adjustments take time.
- Recognize that you are not alone.
- Join a postpartum depression support group in your area.
- Spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself.
- Seek out spiritual support from your religious community.

“Will I ever enjoy the things I use to again?”

Sixth Step: Take time out for yourself. The most important thing you can do for your baby is to take good care of his mother.

- Plan time away from mothering responsibilities. Perhaps the most important task for a mother is that she starts doing things for herself rather than just for her family.
- Go shopping, go out to lunch with a friend, take a bath, read a book, sit down with a cup of tea, get a massage, and more.
- Take time to express your creative self. Hobbies such as knitting, scrap booking, music, and crafts can help to rekindle your previous interests.

- Plan alone time with your partner. You need to remember your relationship as lovers and friends even though your roles have changed. It will be hard to support each other without taking time to nurture your relationship.
- Unleash your sense of humor. Laughter is always good medicine.
- Arrange childcare for your baby so you can take time out for yourself. This could be swapping babysitting with a friend, asking family to help out, hiring a babysitter or finding a student for after school help.
- Trust your partner to care for the baby alone. Resist the temptation to criticize the care he gives the baby.
- Be specific about what you need from your partner. State your needs in terms of what you need and feel, not in terms of what he is doing or not doing.
- Thank your partner for helping you. Gratitude is a powerful relationship booster.
- Accept help when offered and ask for help when you need it.
- Regular exercise has been shown to help manage mild to moderate depression. Start slowly and increase activity gradually.
- Take time out daily for some physical activity. Exercise anyway you can from an organized class (yoga, Tai-Chi, aerobics) where someone can look after your baby if necessary to taking long walks with your baby in a stroller.
- Daily exposure to light and sunshine can help lift your mood. Open your blinds, go outside, sit under bright lights, or consider light therapy.

“I feel guilty because this isn’t what I expected.”

Seventh Step: Negative feelings are common during postpartum depression.

- Express and accept negative feelings. These can include sadness, anxiety, anger, scary thoughts, feeling overwhelmed, hopelessness, guilt, shame, feeling out of control, and loss of concentration.
- Excessive worry and anxiety can make it hard for you to care for yourself and your family. You may need professional help in managing it.
- Some women may experience scary and unwanted thoughts related to their baby’s safety. This can be a common but frightening response to postpartum depression. Please share your concerns with a health care professional. Remember although your feelings and symptoms are frightening, they may neither be dangerous nor harmful.
- Guilt is one of the most common maternal emotions, but it is totally useless.
- You will make mistakes as a mother, everyone does. Admit them, forgive yourself, correct them as best you can, and go on.
- There is no such thing as the perfect mother. Don’t place unrealistic expectations on yourself.
- Having postpartum depression can sometimes make it difficult to bond with your baby. Try to make an extra effort to spend quality time daily with your baby even though you may not feel like it; holding, rocking, talking, reading, massaging, and playing with your baby will help you bond.
- Fake it till you make it. Try to smile at your baby and be positive even if you don’t feel like it. Your baby won’t know the difference; he’ll only love seeing your smile.

- Some women are disappointed in their birth experiences. Accepting these feelings of disappointment and sharing your birth story will bring resolution and closure.
- A good cry can be cleansing and healing. Allow yourself to grieve, feel anger and sadness.
- Find a safe outlet for your feelings and frustrations. Writing in a journal is a safe place to express emotions.
- Find ways to release anger safely without directing it to others. Pound a pillow, run up and down stairs, count to ten slowly, breathe deeply, go outside, or take a drive.
- Realize that having postpartum depression is nothing to be ashamed of.
- Expecting a woman who is suffering from postpartum depression to just “shape up” or “pull herself together” is as useless as if that advice were given to someone who has diabetes or cancer.
- You would not hesitate to get professional help if you were physically sick, do not hesitate to get help for an emotional problem.
- The baby will be fine. Sometimes your health needs to take priority.
- Do not blame yourself. You didn’t ask to feel this way, but it is your job to ask for help.
- Take some moments to reflect on the parts of parenthood that you do enjoy. Notice and cultivate genuine feelings of contentment, joy, love, and happiness when they arise.
- Nurture your spiritual self. Pray or meditate on the wonder of the birth experience and your new child.

“Where do I go for help?”

Step Eight: The majority of women with postpartum depression need professional help.

- Sometimes self-help measures are not enough. If symptoms persist for more than two weeks you should consider seeking professional support.
- If you notice you are feeling worse as time goes on it is important to let your healthcare provider know how you are feeling. Do not let feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment get in the way of doing what you need to do to get better.
- Talk to your health care provider about getting a thorough physical exam. Sometimes the symptoms that may seem to be related to depression can be caused by anemia or thyroid problems.
- Obtain a referral for a knowledgeable counselor or therapist who has experience treating postpartum depression.
- If your health care provider prescribes a medication please do not make changes or go off it without first consulting him.
- Medications are available that are safe to take while breastfeeding.
- Surround yourself with other women who understand what you are going through by joining a postpartum support group.
- Call Spectrum Health to speak with a nurse from our Postpartum Emotional Adjustment Support Program at 616-391-1771 or 616-391-5000.

- In an urgent situation, call 911 or the Network 180 helpline at 1-800-749-7720, 24 hours a day in the Western Michigan area.
- Although rare, there are times that inpatient hospitalization is necessary.
- Remember even though it's hard to do when you're feeling depressed, you need to advocate for your best health care. If for any reason you feel that your concerns are not taken seriously, you may need to seek out another opinion.

You are not to blame. You are not alone. You will recover with help.