

Helping the One You Love

The following information will show you best ways to support a new mother who's suffering from Postpartum Depression (PPD). The sooner you become involved in the recovery process the more you will benefit together. The more you understand what she is experiencing the better supported she will feel. You can be an important lifeline for a woman suffering from PPD. Fathers and families can play a critical role in the diagnosis, treatment, and recovery from PPD by taking appropriate action, and avoiding common mistakes. Many times it is difficult to know what to do, what to say, and what **NOT** to do or say. The following are helpful suggestions for fathers, family and friends.

Recognize the Depression

You need to be aware of the signs of PPD. Help the Mom to recognize the depression. Many moms are unwilling or unable to identify that they have PPD. Learn everything you can about the illness. The more informed you are, the better able you will be to help. The following resources are recommended:

- Websites: www.postpartumdads.org and www.postpartum.net.
- Books:
 - The Postpartum Husband: Practical solutions for living with PPD by Karen Kleinman MSW
 - Beyond the Blues: A Guide to Understanding and Treating Prenatal and Postpartum Depression by Shoshana Bennett and Pec Indman
 - Postpartum Depression for Dummies by Shoshana Bennett.
 - Free PPD Informational Packets are available by calling Spectrum Health at (616-391-5000)

Key points to know about PPD:

- Remember that PPD is a real illness. She is not going crazy: she is simply coping with tremendous changes in her life and her body. PPD is very treatable with an excellent prognosis.
- Your support is vital in the recovery process. She may think that she will never get through this. Research has shown that a woman's depression will improve markedly with the consistent support of a significant other.
- The single most important thing you can do is to be with her. To simply be with her.
- You can not fix this. You can however make a substantial difference in the time and quality of her recovery. You may hold the key to her initial decision to get treatment.
- The longer you pretend that the PPD will go away by itself, the longer her recovery will take.
- The more you expect of her, the more difficult her recovery will be.

Helpful things you can do:

- Be patient
- Accept that her feelings are genuine and don't trivialize them.
- Enlist the aid of other family members to help around the house, if and when they can, including with baby-sitting.
- Care for the baby when able to promote your relationship with your infant, while giving Mom a much needed break each day for time to herself.

- Go to doctor/therapist appointments with her.
- Encourage activity even though she may resist. You might suggest going out to dinner, watching a movie, or going for a walk together. This may provide more time to talk.
- Assist in arranging childcare. When friends offer to baby-sit, say “yes”. Remember that partners need time away from a baby.
- Encourage her to talk about her feelings and show that you understand by listening.
- Be physically affectionate without asking for sex.
- Set visitation limits by telling others “no” when she doesn’t feel like company.
- Call her from work to check in. Call her again if she’s having a bad day.
- Encourage her to rest.
- Create a healing home environment by reducing the level of stress and responsibility that she feels.

Helpful things you can say:

- Tell her she is doing all the right things to get better (therapy, medication, etc) and that this is temporary.
- Tell her you know how hard she’s working at this right now and she is doing the best she can.(be specific, give examples)
- Tell her to let you know what she needs you to do/help and that you will get through this together.
- Tell her your baby will be fine and point out ways you see that she is doing a good job caring for baby. Give specifics like “I love how you smile at the baby. “, etc.
- Tell her you are sorry she is suffering. That it must feel awful.
- Tell her it isn’t her fault and not to place blame.
- Tell her you love her, don’t assume she knows it. Many women feel unsexy and unlovable and need to know their partners aren’t going to leave them.
- Tell her if she’s having scary thoughts that you understand and will make sure she gets the help she needs.

Things you should not say.

- “Think about everything you have to feel happy about.” (She already knows this.)
- “Just relax.” (This suggestion produces the opposite effect. She is not able to relax because of the anxiety that produces physical reactions like increased heart rate, shakiness, shortness of breath, and muscle tension. This is not something she can just will away.)
- “Snap out of it.” (If she could, she would have already. A person cannot snap out of any illness)
- “Just think positively.” (The nature of this illness prevents positive thinking, only negative, guilt-ridden interpretations of the world around are perceived).
- “You just need more sleep.” (It is important, but it is not ALL she needs)
- “Women have been having babies for centuries.” (And women have been getting PPD for centuries as well!)
- “Why can’t you be more like Susan?” (Don’t compare her to other new moms).

- “What did you do all day long?” (Instead compliment her on the things she DID accomplish).
- Do not tell her you are tired of her feeling this way. Frustration and disappointment only adds to anger regarding the situation.
- Do not tell her you liked her better the way she was before.
- Do not tell her she should feel better if only: she were working, she were not working, she went out of the house more, she stayed home more, etc.
- Do not tell her she should lose weight, color her hair, buy new clothes, etc.
- Do not tell her this is just a phase.
- Do not tell her you know she’s strong enough to get through this on her own and she doesn’t need help.

Taking care of yourself:

- Be kind to yourself by setting reasonable expectations.
- Realize that helping her adjust to the new baby may increase the strength of your relationship.
- Take time for yourselves other than at work. Continue to follow some of your own interests.
- Find someone to talk to. Be aware of your own needs.
- Do not blame yourself.
- Do not try to fix this.

Helping the Children:

- Use simple words like “sad”, “tired” and “gloomy”.
- Reassure them often that they did not cause this problem.
- Let them know that this is not the kind of illness caused by germs. Mommy did not “catch it” from anyone.
- Let the children know that Mommy is getting help and will get better soon.
- Let them know that Mommy may have some good days and some bad days as she recovers.
- Ask the children how they can help Mommy to feel better – like drawing a pretty picture, etc.

Top recommendations:

- Get a referral to a Health Care Provider that is open to and/or trained to deal with PPD.
- Attend the Spectrum Health PPD support group. (Call (616) 391-5000 for more information).
- Continue treatment even when she starts feeling better. While discontinuing treatment is very tempting once she starts feeling better, the chances of relapse are much higher if treatment is stopped too early.
- Love her. Be tender. Be supportive. Believe her and believe in her. Do not assume she is “over-reacting” or being “unreasonable.”

As she recovers:

- It is possible that you will think she is getting better before she feels she is getting better. Tell her the ways that you notice improvement.
- Expect significant ups and downs during the recovery process.
- Recovery sometimes takes a long time and may not happen as quickly as you would like it to.
- Remember that you can offer her something a person can't get from a pill bottle, a doctor, a book, or even the internet ...LOVE.