

Postpartum Adjustment

You've spent the past 9 months looking forward to becoming a new family. You've tried to imagine how it will be to hold that precious new baby. What will it be like to be a new mom or a new dad? Will you know what to do for this little baby? How will things change? Will life ever settle back to 'normal'?

It may not be exactly as you imagined it with a new baby in the home! There is a time of physical and emotional adjustment. Mom is dealing with physical recovery from childbirth, as well as hormone changes that can seem like an emotional roller-coaster. Dads can also go through an emotional adjustment as well as the physical stress of sleep deprivation. It takes time for life to settle down into a workable routine. But it helps if you know what to expect and if you have a support system in place to help you through the adjustments.

Changes to Expect After Birth

Most couples go through the following changes after the birth of their baby as they adjust to becoming new parents. You may adjust to the changes so quickly that you barely notice them. Or you may find yourself "hung up" on one or more of these areas. If it is causing a problem to your relationship with your baby or your partner, seek help.

Mom:

- Some moms "fall in love" with baby immediately. Other moms need a "getting acquainted" period before they start to feel strong bonds of love. Both are normal.
- If your pregnancy, labor, or delivery was not exactly like you were expecting, you may experience some feelings of **disappointment** or even **anger**. If baby is fussy or not as easy to care for as expected, this may also cause some feelings of disappointment or anger.
- Mom will be dealing with **physical symptoms** as you recover from birth. In the first week or two, you may have a sore and swollen perineum, uterine cramping (especially while breastfeeding), sore nipples or breast engorgement, and sore muscles from the positions and pushing during delivery. Women who delivered by C/S will also be recovering from abdominal surgery—incision pain, weakness, unable to go up and down stairs easily, etc.
- You will probably experience **total exhaustion** from lack of sleep and being anxious about your new baby. (What helps? Plan to turn off the phone and sleep whenever baby sleeps!)
- Your hormone levels drop after birth, causing your emotions to fluctuate easily. Everything can be great with you and baby, but you'll suddenly find yourself in tears over some minor thing. "**Baby Blues**" are more common during the first 2 weeks after birth, are usually intermittent and short-lived. If symptoms last more than 2 weeks, seek help.
- With the physical and emotional changes going on in postpartum, Mom may find that she **doesn't feel like herself anymore**. Her body feels different and looks different. She has to adjust to the new person she has become—both the physical changes as well as her new role as "Mom".
- It goes from "all about me" during pregnancy to "all about baby" after birth. Mom may experience some feelings of **disappointment** or even **jealousy** with all the attention to baby.
- Baby's intense dependency needs (24/7) can be **overwhelming** to a person who has never had someone else depend on them before. It can make Mom feel **anxious and inadequate**.
- Mom is probably used to being in control of her schedule—she decides when to shower, when to eat, work time, leisure time, etc. Now suddenly she's feeling a **loss of control**—she can't set schedules or get things done because the baby cries and demands immediate attention. You may be surprised at how much of your day will be spent taking care of baby! (Hint: Don't plan to do any housework in those first several weeks after birth. Taking care of you and baby will demand all of your time!)

- Mom may have feelings of **anger or resentment** against Dad or baby because Dad is able to go off to work and get back into his former routines, while leaving her at home all day taking care of baby. This may be more of a problem if Mom left a work situation that she found very fulfilling to become a stay-at-home mom (a job that she doesn't yet feel "accomplished" at).
- Sometimes Mom can experience **feelings of isolation** because of spending so much time with baby and no time with other adults. (What helps? Plan to attend the weekly Cradle Talk support group—it's a great chance to interact with other new Moms! Plan "play dates" with other Moms/babies or go out to lunch with a friend.)
- Mom may not want to resume **sexual relations** right away (afraid of it hurting, not feeling "desirable" with all the bodily changes going on, feeling like she's "touched out" because of baby clinging to her all day). Ironically, Mom still feels a very strong need for intimacy with her partner! (What helps? Dad—let her know you still find her desirable as a woman! She may welcome a back rub or just being held closely. Plan a "date night" where you spend time together focused on each other.)

Dad:

- If Dad is the main caregiver for the baby, while Mom goes back to work, Dad may experience many of the feelings of anxiety, loss of control, and isolation as listed above.
- Dad may also experience **exhaustion** from lack of sleep and being anxious about the new baby.
- Dad may **feel left out**—Mom doesn't seem to have time for him anymore because the baby takes up so much of her time.
- He may also feel **inadequate**--suddenly Mom has all these maternal instincts that kick in and she's caring for baby in ways that seem very natural and correct, whereas Dad may feel like he doesn't have a clue what to do with baby.
- Dad may also feel a weight of **responsibility**—he has a family depending on him now. Will he be a good provider, will he be a good father, etc.?
- If Mom is going through Baby Blues or Postpartum mood disorders, Dad may wonder "**What happened** to the wonderful woman that I was married to? Where did she go? Will I get her back?"
- Dad also has to adjust to thinking of her in her **new role** as a mother in addition to lover and wife/partner. He may be reluctant to resume **sexual relations** (afraid of hurting her, not wanting to get her pregnant again after what she just went through, etc.).

The partner relationship:

The partner relationship has to go through some adjustments too, as you shift from a couple to a family. Often, Dad feels left out at first. Participating in baby's care will help him bond more quickly and before long, you will think of yourselves as a family! Be sure to set aside some time as a couple during those first hectic weeks and remember that communication is KEY! Talk about how you are feeling and what you perceive your role to be, as well as your partner's role. It's very easy to mistake what your partner is feeling or to assume he/she knows what you are going through, when it may very well be the opposite!

Role of the support partner

As someone who is there to support and encourage Mom, there are things you can do to help ease this transition period for her:

- Look after her while she looks after the baby (breastfeedings, etc). Help meet her needs (bring her water, pillows, and a snack while nursing).

- Take care of the baby too--take ownership of some part of baby's care (bath, burping, diaper changes, etc.). Mom should refrain from criticizing or pointing out "her way" of doing it, so that Dad can gain confidence in caring for baby on his own. (HINT: Baby benefits greatly from having two people do things differently!)
- Notice how she is handling things. (She may be getting depressed but trying to hide it. Believe how she acts rather than what she says.)
- Ask what you can do to help (be specific) and do it. (HINT: mowing the grass is NOT helping her out!)
- Don't take it personally! Remember all those hormone changes she's going through! If you thought PMS was bad....!!!
- Let her get 5 hours of uninterrupted sleep at night. Bring her the baby for feedings, change the diaper afterwards, etc. Turn off the phone and limit visitors so that she can sleep when baby sleeps (and you can curl up next to her!).
- Lower your expectations (especially regarding housework and her appearance! She may not have time to change out of her PJs and brush her teeth until 4 in the afternoon some days!). Get friends or family to help out with the housework and meals. Mom should only concentrate on taking care of herself and baby during those first few weeks!
- Take care of baby to give her time to get a daily shower or soak in the tub, wash and dry her hair, and get regular meals. And if she is home alone with baby all day, make sure there are ready-to-eat meals and snacks in the refrigerator.
- Encourage her to get out of the house some—a daily walk around the block, attending the weekly Cradle Talk support group, meeting friends for lunch once in awhile, etc.
- If you suspect a perinatal mood disorder, take charge! Get her to a healthcare provider or call the Mom's line (630) 527-7294. Postpartum depression is 100% treatable if caught early!

What not to say: "Snap out of it!"

What to say:

- We'll get through this!
- I'm here for you.
- Is there something I can do to help you...please tell me!
- I'm sorry this is so hard for you, it must feel awful.
- I love you very much! The baby loves you very much!
- This is temporary....you'll get yourself back.
- We're in this together!

Remember: This is a period of adjustment for all new families. You may go through it quickly, with very little problems. If you encounter problems, seek help from family, friends, or health professionals!