

POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology has made this month Post Partum Depression Awareness Month. Hardly a day goes by that one does not read about an act of violence committed and then pleaded innocent by way of post partum depression. This article will attempt to define and explain this condition yet leaving defense verdicts to lawyers and jurors. Many new mothers feel sadness, fear, anger and anxiety after having a baby. This is normal but must be distinguished from the “blues” to true post partum depression that affects 10% of new mothers. This condition lasts longer and is more intense than the blues and often requires counseling and treatment.

Many new mothers, after the exhilaration of successfully brought a newborn into the world, are surprised that they feel weak, alone and upset after birth. They do not understand why they feel depressed at this time. They feel depressed, anxious and upset and may cry for no reason, have trouble sleeping and eating, and question themselves about their ability to care for a baby. 70% of mothers have these feelings (the “blues”) and most go away after a few hours or a week. Some think that the profound drop in hormone levels after delivery is the cause but no one cause has been found.

There are women in whom this depression rises to longer time frames of sadness, anxiety and despair that they have trouble coping with daily tasks. They last longer than two weeks, normal function is impaired, she is not able to care for her baby or herself, appetite changes, pleasure is impossible, interest in the baby is lacking, panic attacks occur, she fears harming the baby, she has thoughts of self harm and thoughts of suicide. These symptoms are more common if the mother has had postpartum depression before, has a psychiatric illness or a recent stress. This is a severe mental illness and occurs in 1-3/1,000 births. As stated previously the profound drop in hormone levels after delivery can trigger depression just as hormone drops can trigger premenstrual tension. A decrease in thyroid hormone, common after delivery, can also cause mood swings, nervousness, fatigue, trouble sleeping, and tension. Just the fatigue of delivery and/or cesarean section can be a major reason for depression. Emotional aspects can affect self esteem especially if the pregnancy had been unplanned, the delivery is early, or there is a birth defect that makes adjustment harder. Feelings of loss are common, might lead to depression and can take many forms: loss of freedom by the sense of being trapped and tied down; loss of old identity; loss of slim figure and perception of loss of sex appeal. These factors are amplified if there is a loss of support from partner or family. The role of breast feeding must be taken into account as new mothers who stop or can't breast feed frequently feel guilty and this leads to depression.

This article would not be complete without addressing some of the myths of motherhood: 1.) motherhood is instinctive: it is not, new mothers need to learn mothering skills that take time and patience and books and pediatric counseling. 2.) The perfect baby: this child does not exist. Each baby has a distinct personality –some are easy and some are more difficult to care for. 3.) The perfect mother; for some this is a never ending goal but no mother is perfect and a balance must be struck between household duties, job, and mothering.

So, after delivery get plenty of rest and sleep when the baby sleeps, ask for help from family and friends, take special care of yourself and get out of the house, take a walk, meet with friends. Above all, spend time with your partner and talk out feelings. If the “blues” do not lessen in two weeks call your doctor as this may be a sign of depression. Be sure to be candid if you are afraid of hurting yourself or your baby. You might be referred to specialists to treat the depression through counseling and/or medication. It must be emphasized that a new mother needs to learn how to nurture herself and family and to take time for herself and family do only what is needed and let the rest go. Remember that the “blues” are normal but if they continue after about two weeks it is possible that true postpartum depression has set in and counseling and treatment should be sought.