

Postpartum Mood Disorder

How the Helper Can Help

This handout may give you some ideas for helping a parent who is experiencing postpartum adjustment or a postpartum mood disorder. It is important to be aware that either or both parents can experience postpartum depression and may need support.

Practical Support

The following suggestions have been found to be useful.

- Help to develop a **simple routine** for the day. Encourage choosing one or two tasks that are manageable each day. Acknowledge and validate what is getting done as opposed to what is left to do.
- Encourage **rest** when needed. Sleep may be difficult during the day but sitting down and having a rest may be possible. Resting is much more important than housework.
- Encourage to **eat** throughout the day. Keep a store of nutritious quick foods (cheese, cup of soup, fruit, yogurt) in the house to snack on even if a meal cannot be managed.
- Encourage **frequent breaks**. Breaks are times away from baby. Even a small break is important (i.e. a cup of tea when baby is asleep).
- Offer information about **places to go with children** (i.e. family places, kids' play centers, parent centers such as Parent Link).
- Encourage to **get out of the house** and support **finding childcare** if necessary. This will be a difficult task and you may need to provide step-by-step assistance and encouragement.
- Encourage a simple form of **physical activity on a regular basis** (i.e. walking) preferably without children.
- Offer to participate in an **activity together**.
- Encourage to develop a **support system** (i.e. friends, family, support groups, professionals).
- Encourage to **talk** about feelings.

Emotional Support

Ways to show emotional support include:

Reassurance

Let them know that the bad feelings may be part of the depression. These feelings do not mean they are crazy, bad people or bad parents. Reassure them that it will get better and that it may take some time.

Encourage to recognize difficult emotions and accept feelings

Difficult emotions can be hard to accept and are often denied. Accepting the feelings and allowing their expression is healing. Tears can also be healing and can actually relieve stress. Encourage opportunities to acknowledge the feelings such as talking to someone or writing them down. Help them find ways to safely deal with strong negative feelings such as anger.

Assist to identify good feelings

Help to recognize and experience genuine feelings of contentment, joy, love and happiness when they arise. Encourage activities that promote these feelings.

Support ability to make healthy decisions

Because the parent is learning to adjust to their new role, they often feel unsure about making decisions. The information and advice that is received can be contradictory and overwhelming. Provide encouragement and support.

Encourage to take one day at a time

A depressed parent may also feel anxious. They will often worry unnecessarily about things that have happened in the past or that may happen in the future. Help them to focus, as much as possible, on today.

Help them to redefine themselves

Encourage them to talk about who they were before the baby. Ask how this is different from who they are now. They will be better able to regain a renewed sense of self if they are able to identify, and then grieve for, what has been lost.

Encourage them to give themselves credit

Parents who experience postpartum depression have high expectations of themselves and feel guilty when they do not meet these expectations. Help them to acknowledge that parenting is hard work and to give credit for what is done.

Share your own experiences

If you are a parent, share your experiences when appropriate.

Reassure that lack of sexual interest is normal at this time

A lack of sexual feeling is normal in postpartum depression. Encourage parents to talk about this with and be supportive of one another. Expressions of affection are needed even without engaging in sexual activity. As a parent recovers, the feelings will come back.

Your non-judgmental, caring support will be the most helpful. Listening without criticizing is much more important than saying the “right” thing or having all the answers.

When you are helping someone, remember you also need to take care of yourself. Supporting someone who feels depressed is very hard work.

- Try to arrange your support for times when you will be relaxed and not likely to be interrupted
- If you feel unable to provide support on a particular occasion, arrange another time.

If you have trouble finding the time, or are feeling resentful or irritable with the parent, it is probably a sign that you are overextending yourself. You cannot help someone if you are feeling this way and means you need to take some time to care for yourself, too.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

Alberta Health Link (24hours/day 7days/week) 1-866-408-5465
 Mental Health Help Line (24hours/day 7days/week) 1-877-303-2642
 Your local Community Health Centre during business hours
www.myhealth.alberta.ca

FOR URGENT HELP

Mental Health Help Line 1-877-303-2642
 Nearest emergency department