



## **Beyond the Blues, Partners**

This handout is designed to provide support to you, the partner, regardless of your gender or marital status. To avoid confusion, we sometimes refer to the new mother as “wife.” The sooner you become involved in the recovery process, and the greater your involvement, the more you both will benefit— together and separately. The more you understand what she is experiencing, the better supported she will feel. That will, in turn, expedite her recovery.

### **Things to Keep in Mind**

- You didn’t cause her illness and you can’t take it away. Postpartum depression and anxiety is a biochemical disorder. It is no one’s fault. When her brain chemistry returns to normal, she will feel like herself again. It is your job to support her as this happens.
- She doesn’t expect you to “fix it.” Many partners feel frustrated because they feel inadequate or unable to fix the problem. She doesn’t need you to try to take the problem away. This isn’t like a leaky faucet that can be repaired with a new washer. Don’t suggest quick-fix solutions. This isn’t that kind of problem. She just needs you to listen.
- Get the support you need so you can be there for her. We frequently see the phenomenon of the partner becoming depressed during or after his wife’s depression. You can avoid this by taking care of yourself and getting your own support from friends, family, or professionals. You should make sure to get breaks from taking care of your family. Regular exercise or other stress-reducing activity is important so you can remain the solid support for your wife. Provide a stand-in support person for her while you’re gone.
- Don’t take it personally. Irritability is common with postpartum depression/anxiety. Don’t allow yourself to become a verbal punching bag. It’s not good for anyone concerned. She feels guilty after saying hurtful things to you. If you feel you didn’t deserve to be snapped at, explain that to her calmly.
- Just being there with and for her is doing a great deal. Being present and letting her know you support her is often all she’ll need. Ask her what words she needs to hear for reassurance, and say them to her often.
- Lower your expectations. Even a non-depressed postpartum woman cannot realistically be expected to cook dinner and clean house. She may be guilt-tripping herself about not measuring up to her own expectations and worrying that you will also be disappointed. Remind her that parenting your child and taking care of your home is also your job, not just hers. Your relationship and family will emerge from this crisis stronger than ever.
- Let her sleep at night. She needs five hours of uninterrupted sleep per night to complete a full sleep cycle and restore her biorhythms. If you want your wife back quicker, be on duty for half the night without disturbing her. Many dads and partners have expressed how much closer they are to their children because of nighttime caretaking. If you can’t be up with the baby during the night, hire someone who can take your place. A temporary baby nurse will be worth her weight in gold.

### **From a Dad Who's Been There**

You've just come home from a long day at work, hoping to find a happy home — and what you find makes you want to get back into the car and leave. Your wife is in tears, the baby is crying. The house is a mess, and forget about dinner. By now you know better than to ask how her day was. Her response is always the same. "I hate this 'mother' stuff. I don't want to be anyone's mother. I want my old life back. I want to be happy again." You shrug, go to hold the baby, and wonder why your wife is feeling this way, why she's not as happy as you are about the baby, and when she will snap out of it.

You're not alone. I lived with this scene every day for two years. Every ounce of my patience was tested, but I kept hoping that things would be "normal" again. I focused on my baby daughter, the one in the midst of this mess, and kept telling myself I'd be there for her.

Slowly, slowly, my wife recovered from the illness. Today, we have that happy home we both always wanted. Be patient and tolerant. Remember, it will get better.

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### **HOW TO HELP MOM**

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- Reassure her: this is not her fault; she is not alone; she will get better.
- Encourage her to talk about her feelings and listen without judgment.
- Help with housework before she asks you.
- Encourage her to take time for herself. Breaks are a necessity; fatigue is a major contributing factor to worsening symptoms.
- Don't expect her to be super-housewife just because she's home all day.
- Be realistic about what time you'll be home, and come home on time.
- Help her reach out to others for support and treatment.
- Schedule some dates with her and work together to find a babysitter.
- Offer simple affection and physical comfort, but be patient if she is not up for sex. It's normal for her to have a low sex drive with depression, and rest and recovery will help to bring it back.

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### **DEALING WITH HER ANGER AND IRRITABILITY**

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- Do what you can to make sure she eats regularly throughout the day, because low blood sugar results in a low mood and frustration. Have healthy and easy snacks on hand.
- Do your best to listen for the real request at the heart of her frustration. Reduce conflict by telling her, "I know we can work this out. I am listening."
- Keep the lines of communication open. Verbalize your feelings instead of distancing from her. It is helpful to take a break if your tempers are hot, but do get back to communicating.
- If she is expressing anger in such a way that you can't stay supportive, you might say something like, "I want to listen to you. I know this is important, but I'm having a hard time because you're so mad at me. Can we take a break and talk about it later?"
- Ask her how you can help right now. If she doesn't know, make some suggestions.