

Playing the Postpartum Blues

After a Baby's Birth, New Parents Find Fantasies Yield to Hard Reality

By: Len Cooper
And Nina Killham

If only the reality of having a baby were more like the fantasy.

"It can be so frustrating when you do everything for the baby and all you get in return are kicks and screams," said Gail Whitlow, the single parent of a two-year-old girl. "During a simple bath, they act as if you're killing them. Suddenly the baby and the diaper bag become added appendages that you just have to get used to."

Whitlow's feelings, psychologists say, are typical of new parents, who are often unprepared for the demands an infant places on them. The Northeast Washington mother learned to deal with hers by talking with relatives and friends who had gone through similar experiences. But for other parents, the problems can mushroom, sap the joy from parenthood and become unmanageable.

"Some people have the idea that you are supposed to love your children all the time — but that simply isn't true," said Marguerite Fogel, an area psychologist and supervisor of the Fogel Foundation, Inc., a treatment center for sexuality and relationship problems. In fact, she said "postpartum blues" — the depression and acute anxiety that accompany the birth of a baby — is common, and most women feel it to some extent.

"Sometimes, a baby can be sick or hurting and it cries and cries and you do everything possible to make it stop, and it still screams, you want to throw it across the room. That's a normal reaction."

Most parents of newborns will not talk about their depression, believing their anxiety to be a sign of bad parenting. Often, they feel guilty that the joy associated with the arrival of a newborn is tainted by feelings of disappointment and entrapment.

To avoid or reduce postpartum blues after the baby arrives, both the mother and father should allow themselves time to part with the pre-birth fantasy and come to terms with the real baby, therapists say.

"People go into childbirth looking at the joy and pleasure of a life without any concept of the responsibility that having a living organism dependent on them means," said Julius Fogel, medical director of the Fogel Foundation, Inc. and husband of Marguerite. "If their ego strength is not strong enough and they are suddenly confronted with a child that's totally dependent, they just can't tolerate it."

Although babies born prematurely or physically impaired can aggravate the depression, even healthy babies are usually so unlike what parents expected that it becomes difficult for them to accept sudden changes in their life style. Parents — especially the primary caregiver, which is usually the mother — suddenly realize that every minute of every hour of their time belongs to someone else.

"There's a feeling of a life sentence, and this life is absolutely depending on you and there is no escape," said Marguerite Fogel.

For the new mother, the sharp reality of post-birth life after the pampered months of pregnancy can come as a shock. During pregnancy, the mother usually receives gifts and enjoys the solicitous attention that is focused on her. When the baby arrives, the attention shifts to the child.

"It is somewhat abrupt," said Whitlow. "During the pregnancy people are genuinely concerned about you. After the birth you feel somewhat dismissed. The transition is most apparent when the relatives come to visit, and you've been up all night and you're feeling really haggard and the baby's been comfortable sleeping all day and there they all are, ooh-ing and aah-ing over the baby."

"And if you're breast-feeding and the baby has chomped you to bits," she says, "you don't want to complain. Or when you finally lose a few pounds so you get dressed up to go out with the kid, and it vomits all over your dress. And you're still trying to save face."

Husbands can be doubly left out in the cold, said Whitlow. While his wife is pregnant, the husband takes the back seat, and once the baby is born, he just moves over to make room for his wife.

"You can't take it to heart," said Whitlow, "but compounded with exhaustion, you do feel a little left out."

After the birth of a child, siblings also undergo a change in status within the family. Young children, robbed of attention, can grow resentful. In fact, counselors advise, children who show unusual resentment for the newborn should never be left alone with it. According to Marguerite Fogel, some siblings have been known to attack newborns. More commonly, if not dealt with correctly, some of these children will harbor feelings of resentment into their adulthood.

In certain instances, the mother or the father himself will resent the child. In extreme cases, new parents may develop a psychotic depression and abuse their newborn. In addition, some depressions are severe enough that the parent may have to be institutionalized, but such cases are extremely rare.

There is no way to predict to what extent the new parents will experience the blues. Husbands and extended families are essential in assisting the mother to stave off of the overwhelming feelings of panic and helplessness. The blues can return with the birth of additional children, but by then the parents may have learned to deal with the emotional turmoil from parenting the earlier child.

Single mothers, or mothers in couples who are alone and away from friends and family, tend to experience a longer or deeper depression. "In our culture today, many women are away from their families and there isn't as much family support as there used to be," said Julius Fogel. "This adds to the enormous feeling of depression. Grandmother and mother and children used to be together, and the cultural change may add to the depression."

Julius Fogel noted that this could be an underlying reason why many women make an unconscious decision to have only one child or feel incapable of taking care of any child at all. They may feel that there is no one around to help, he said.

Paradoxically, in-laws and grandparents can also worsen the depression by taking over or heavily criticizing the mother's method of parenting. Making the mother feel as though she isn't able to raise her own child will increase her anxiety.

"When my first child was born, there was a new intense sensation of love. I knew what it meant to be willing to give up your life for your child," said Gabriel Chikes, a civil service worker and father of a 7-month-old and a 3-year-old. "I can understand the reasoning behind people saying that children can bring families together. But they also can be fuel that kindles tremendous fights pertaining to the child's care. You have to talk and not assume that parenting comes naturally."

Exhaustion can worsen depression in the new mother. In the early months of the child's life, there is no established sleep pattern and the mother must respond to the child's needs throughout the night. Not only is the mother's sleep time greatly reduced, she is only able to relax at the most a few hours at a time. And when the baby sleeps, many a mother is tempted to catch up neglected chores — such as cleaning the house, personal grooming or contacting forgotten friends — instead of resting.

According to experts, however, some things must be compromised. Women with full-time responsibilities of parenting should sleep when the baby sleeps and let the husband, friends, or relatives take care of the rest.

"The mother must reconstitute herself and refurbish herself, relieving herself of the responsibility of going dancing and doing some of the things she's used to doing," said Julius Fogel. "Then she can come home and regive to the baby."

Support groups, birthing classes, and talking to other mothers with newborns can be an invaluable source of strength. By taking a class, for example, and reading all the literature, the parents can recall while in the throes of the depression what they learned intellectually months earlier.

"Compared to five or 10 years ago, parents are beginning to seek professional help more often," said Julius Fogel. "They are a little more sophisticated when it comes to taking care of their emotional needs."

For working mothers, the problems are different. There are additional pressures of finding daycare, but if that is resolved, the mother often looks forward to the relatively shorter times she has to spend with the infant.

Mothers who stay at home often expect the same attitude from the working father — a desire to help and spend time with the child. If the father is not understanding or willing to take up his share of child care, however, it can lead to a major conflict.

"Men think women are so happy and contented in their motherhood," said Whitlow. "They look at you with such disdain if you talk about the experience being exhausting and frustrating at times."

Area counselors agree that when the husband and the extended family understand their

roles, life for the mother can move toward a semblance of stability.

And, in the end, most families do settle down. "When my daughter was 4 weeks old and my mother returned home," said Whitlow, "I sat in the rocker with Kristina in my lap and told her it's just you and me, and we've got to make it through this. All that night she seemed to sleep peacefully."

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