

Guide to postpartum mood and anxiety disorders

After you have your baby, you might think your routine will soon go back to some version of “normal.” But the struggles of the postpartum period can surprise new parents. An estimated one in seven birthing parents develops a postpartum mood and anxiety disorder (PMAD). Fortunately, PMADs are common and treatable. Whatever you’re dealing with, you’re not alone.





01

The “baby blues”

OVERVIEW

70%-80% of new parents experience the “baby blues.” Experts think it may be linked to hormonal changes, sleep deprivation, physically recovering after birth, and the disruption a baby can bring to your routine.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

- Frequent, prolonged bouts of crying
- Struggling to eat, sleep, make decisions, or bond with your baby

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Symptoms typically subside on their own within two weeks after birth. However, if they persist, it may be a sign of postpartum depression. If you’re struggling, try to find time to get out of the house every day or speak to your OB-GYN or mental health provider.

02

Postpartum depression

OVERVIEW

Postpartum depression is clinical depression after giving birth that extends past two weeks. The Cleveland Clinic estimates up to 15% of new parents experience postpartum depression, which is highly treatable.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

- Depressed, irritable, or angry mood
- Severe mood swings
- Struggling to bond with your baby
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Loss of appetite or eating much more than usual
- Insomnia and lack of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness, shame, guilt, or inadequacy
- Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

TREATMENT OPTIONS

The best treatment combination depends on your personal situation and what you’re comfortable with, but the two most common options are Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) or antidepressant medications. While treatment time may vary based on symptoms, sharing your experience with a loved one or health care provider can provide immediate relief.

03

Postpartum anxiety

OVERVIEW

It's normal to worry about your new baby, but if your worry feels excessive or constant, it may be postpartum anxiety. Studies show 10% of new parents experience clinical anxiety—persistent feelings of worry—after giving birth.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

- Racing thoughts
- Trouble sleeping
- Physical panic symptoms like dizziness or nausea

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Finding a support group, asking for more help from family and friends, and getting back into a routine can help with postpartum anxiety. Treatment includes CBT therapy and antidepressant medications.

04

Postpartum OCD

OVERVIEW

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition characterized by intrusive, obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Postpartum OCD can be isolating and provoke feelings of shame, particularly when your intrusive thoughts are graphic and scary.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

- Obsessions with preventing harm to the baby
- Compulsions like checking on the baby, excessive washing, or repeating prayers
- Trouble sleeping because of obsessions and compulsive urges

TREATMENT OPTIONS

It's important to know that the condition is temporary, and treatments are extremely effective. Treatment can include exposure and response prevention (ERP). This involves identifying and exposing yourself to thoughts or situations that trigger anxiety while a therapist helps you avoid compulsive behaviors. Treatment can also include antidepressants.



05

Postpartum psychosis

OVERVIEW

Postpartum psychosis is a rare condition that typically develops within a week of delivery. It affects roughly 1 in 1,000 new parents. The National Institute of Mental Health defines psychosis as an episode where you struggle to differentiate between what's real and what's not. If you're having a psychotic episode, you need to contact your doctor or emergency services right away. Risk factors include a personal or family history of bipolar disorder or a previous psychotic episode. Postpartum psychosis is very serious, and you should get help right away if you experience symptoms.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

- Hallucinations
- Delusions or paranoia
- Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

TREATMENT OPTIONS

If you're having a psychotic episode, you need to contact your doctor or emergency services immediately. Because postpartum psychosis is a psychiatric emergency, it's treated with inpatient support. Treatment options include antipsychotic medications, hospitalization to manage symptoms and keep you safe, and therapy once the psychotic episode subsides.

06

Postpartum PTSD

OVERVIEW

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a condition related to a traumatic event—typically something that happened during labor and delivery. Risk factors include births that require interventions or involve an emergency, as well as patients with a history of PTSD.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Trouble sleeping
- Heightened anxiety, irritability, and anger

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Treatment includes CBT as well as several newer therapies. Narrative exposure therapy (NET) involves working with your therapist to create a written, chronological narrative of your life with the aim of separating the individual from the event. EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) involves a therapist asking you to mentally relive traumas that trigger your PTSD, in order to create desensitization.



The bottom line

PMADs are common, and there's enough overlap between the symptoms of some of these conditions to make things pretty confusing. If you're concerned about your mental health at any point, reach out to your OB-GYN or mental health provider—remember, these conditions are treatable, and with the right help you will feel better.