

# **COPING WITH POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION**



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## RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

*“I’m a bad parent.”*

*“My baby hates me.”*

*“I’m selfish for missing my old life.”*

*“I’m failing.”*

*“My family would be better off without me.”*

Welcoming a new baby is often accompanied by societal expectations that parents will experience feelings of excitement and joy. However, sleeplessness, disruption in routine, and lack of time for self can cause many new parents to have negative or upsetting thoughts about themselves, or their child. Sometimes the thoughts persist, and can cause significant distress. Parents may feel sad or disconnected from their baby. They may wonder what’s wrong with them, or believe they are failing.

Although those who suffer from postpartum depression may feel isolated and alone, their experience is unfortunately quite common. Approximately 17% of birthing people experience postpartum depression in

the period following childbirth, and rates are higher in areas where families are exposed to socioeconomic stressors, community violence, or trauma.

In addition to distressing or negative thoughts, symptoms of postpartum depression can include:

- Feelings of sadness, guilt, shame, anger, or irritability
- Physical symptoms like changes to appetite or sleep; feeling heavy or tired
- Loss of pleasure or joy; disinterest in previously enjoyable activities
- Feeling disconnected from others, including the baby

Some people have thoughts of hurting themselves or their baby.



# THE IMPACT OF POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Postpartum depression is a very difficult experience for a new parent, and it can have a ripple effect on the entire household. Studies have shown that partners of individuals who were experiencing postpartum depression were more likely to report depression symptoms themselves. They were also likely to experience higher levels of stress and less optimal interactions with their infants.

Postpartum depression can have a lasting effect on health outcomes for infants and has been associated with lower weight, increased physical health concerns, cognitive and language delays, and behavioral difficulties.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound negative effect on the mental health of birthing people, as a result of reduced or cancelled medical appointments, losses in the family, and feelings of isolation caused by social distancing measures.

Individuals with postpartum depression frequently face stigma that may stop them from seeking necessary help. Having postpartum depression does not make someone a bad parent or mean

that they are going to hurt their baby. Being a parent is incredibly hard, and experiencing postpartum depression can make the challenges of parenthood seem insurmountable. Parents suffering from postpartum depression may need additional support—from family, friends, community leaders, or a therapist—to help ease the burden.

## REASONS TO BE HOPEFUL

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for postpartum depression and can help new parents navigate changes in thinking, behavior, and mood. CBT can help individuals build hope, overcome feelings of helplessness, better care for their own physical and mental health, and set reasonable expectations for themselves and others.

Treatment may include identifying thoughts like, “I’m a bad parent,” and helping individuals evaluate whether the thought is completely true, completely false, or somewhere in between. CBT therapists can also help individuals decide whether the thought is helpful, and evaluate the impact of continuing to believe the thought. Often, individuals discover that when they are able to think about the situations in their lives more realistically, they are able to feel

better and engage in more productive behaviors, like problem-solving.

CBT therapists also help individuals clarify their values and aspirations, and set meaningful goals. This is particularly important for new parents, as they may have given up hobbies, activities, and opportunities to connect with loved ones after bringing home a baby. Thoughts like, “I’m too tired to go for a walk,” or “It’s selfish of me to go out with my friends when I have a baby at home,” can get in the way of participating in meaningful activities that provide opportunities for feelings of connection, pleasure, or accomplishment.

## **STARTING CBT TREATMENT**

If you decide to seek CBT treatment for postpartum depression, you should expect your therapist to be warm, empathetic, sensitive, supportive, and non-judgmental. Being able to trust your therapist is critical for a productive therapy relationship.

Your therapist will probably begin therapy by doing a comprehensive assessment, which may consist of filling out forms, completing questionnaires, and responding to questions about your thoughts and feelings. Your therapist should assess whether you are at risk



of hurting yourself or your baby, and if necessary, come up with a plan to keep you and your child safe.

Your therapist will likely provide psychoeducation, e.g. they will explain the symptoms of postpartum depression and answer your questions about your diagnosis. They will elicit your goals, values, and aspirations, and use this information to create an individualized treatment plan. They will then explain what to expect during treatment, share their treatment plan, and ask for feedback along the way, giving you the opportunity to collaborate on the plan and your goals for treatment.



## COMMON TECHNIQUES

Depending on your individual symptoms and challenges, as well as your identified strengths and goals, your therapist will work with you to select interventions that can help you feel better. Some common CBT interventions for postpartum depression include:

- Normalizing the difficult nature of new parenthood and helping you set reasonable expectations for yourself, your partner, and your baby
- Identifying and evaluating unhelpful beliefs and assumptions you may

hold about parenthood

- Learning problem-solving and time-management skills that can help you prioritize your own health and wellbeing
- Scheduling time for connection, social support, and working toward meaningful goals
- Re-engaging in activities that you may have given up since becoming a parent
- Learning communication strategies that can help you resolve conflicts with your partner or other family members
- Learning decision-making skills to help you navigate parenthood
- Practicing mindfulness strategies that can help you avoid ruminating, reduce self-criticism, and remain present

## MAKING THE MOST OF THERAPY

Unlike many other types of therapy, CBT is present-oriented and active. CBT therapists believe that the way people get better is by making small changes in their thinking and behavior every day. At the conclusion of each session, you and your therapist will agree on an “Action Plan,” e.g. steps for you to take in the coming week to help you feel better. Common Action Plans include reviewing therapy notes, noticing and

writing down distressing or unhelpful thoughts, and practicing new skills. Completing your Action Plan each week will help you make the most of therapy. Being honest with your therapist is another way you can ensure therapy is as effective as possible. This includes letting your therapist know when they got something wrong, or if something they said or did upset you. CBT therapists want to know when they've made a mistake so they can correct it and avoid making the same mistake in the future. Your therapist may ask you for feedback at the end of each session. Always let your therapist know what you think is working—and what isn't.

Becoming a parent is an incredibly difficult life change, whether you are welcoming your first child, or your fourth! It's common to struggle with a range of emotions. But if you feel you may be suffering from postpartum depression, please don't hesitate to seek help.

# CBT RESOURCES

## BECK INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy was established in 1994 by Dr. Aaron T. Beck and Dr. Judith S. Beck as a setting for state-of-the-art psychotherapy and professional training in CBT. Over the last three decades, Beck Institute has built exceptional in-person and online trainings in CBT, trained thousands of professionals from around the world, and created a global community of CBT practitioners.



## PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COACHING

At Beck Institute, we are committed to providing modern CBT that not only helps clients with a wide range of symptoms and challenges but emphasizes a broader vision of well-being and life satisfaction. Our therapists help clients align their lives with their values and aspirations, achieve their goals, and foster feelings of purpose, empowerment, and connection.

Our CBT-based wellness coaching program teaches practical skills that help clients build confidence, manage stress, and stay on track to achieve their goals—and maintain progress long term. To learn more about clinical services and wellness coaching at Beck Institute, call 610.664.3020 or visit [cares.beckinstitute.org](https://cares.beckinstitute.org).

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (US): 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line: 741742

## ONLINE RESOURCES

- Visit [cares.beckinstitute.org](https://cares.beckinstitute.org) for information and resources about CBT.
- Sign up for the Beck Institute newsletter [beckinstitute.org/newsletter](https://beckinstitute.org/newsletter).
- Engage with Beck Institute on social media:



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