

Postpartum Depression: How To Find Emotional Balance

<http://postpartumprogress.com/postpartum-depression-how-to-find-emotional-balance>

By Katherine Stone September 19, 2011



I have just returned from the annual Postpartum Support International Conference in Seattle. Amidst all of the outstanding talks and invaluable information that was passed along was an underlying message that, I know, we have all heard many, many times before: moms need to be taking good care of themselves so that they can be there for themselves, their babies and children, and their families.

This goes, of course, for any mom whether she is suffering from a postpartum mood and anxiety disorder like postpartum depression or not. But for the 20% or so of moms who are in a less resilient and more vulnerable place, this need cannot be repeated enough. **FILL YOURSELVES UP AS BEST YOU CAN.** This is much easier for those women whose mood or anxiety disorder is not severe, and often the support of medication and/or therapy is needed in order to get to the place where this self-caring can even begin. But there is one thing that comes across in all of the research out there. Brains and bodies are connected intimately. One cannot be healthy without the health and support of the other. So, with that said, here is a recap of some helpful tips and strategies to make sure that you are doing what you can for your body and brain.

1. Adequate nutrition: Our brains need healthy nutrition and protein to function adequately. In fact, “feel good hormones” (Serotonin) are not naturally occurring in our bodies and therefore require important building blocks (amino acids) that come from the food that we eat. A well-balanced diet with adequate protein intake is required for optimal emotional wellbeing.

HOW TO DO THIS: Adequate nutritional intake does not necessarily mean that you need to sit down to three full meals a day (simply not always possible with a newborn). At the grocery store, find a number of healthy, protein-based snacks that you can grab on the go, keep in your diaper bag, have stashed at work or placed on your bedside table. These might include but are not limited to: nuts, nut butters, lean sandwich meats, hardboiled eggs, yogurt, protein shakes or protein bars. Be on the lookout for sugar as a main ingredient, however. Make sure that these are low in sugar and high in protein. A good sleep tip: Make sure that the last thing you eat at night is protein-based rather than sugar-based. This can help with sleep quality and help prevent frequent waking due to blood sugar shifts during sleep.

2. Adequate sleep: While having a newborn certainly does make it difficult to get the same quality/quantity of sleep than before you were a mama, sleep deprivation should be monitored. One recent study showed that quality of sleep is a higher predictor for postpartum depression and anxiety than the temperament of one’s baby (meaning a mom with a difficult baby who gets “enough” sleep is less likely to become depressed/anxious than a mom with an “easy baby” who is sleep deprived) ... and so

getting enough sleep can not be emphasized enough.

HOW TO DO THIS: This one is important for all moms, but especially those who are at high risk for developing a postpartum mood or anxiety disorder. One way to think of this goal is to attempt to get at least 5 hours of uninterrupted sleep at least 3-4 nights/week. Those of you whose babies are taking a bottle will have an easier time with this one, I know, but I encourage every mama to shoot for this. Enlist the help of your husband, partner, family member, friend, or hired support. If possible, sleep in a different room for these blocks of sleep; or if this isn't possible, try earplugs or a white noise machine. During the day, do your best to sleep or rest when your baby sleeps.

3. Mild to Moderate Exercise: Women who get some form of mild to moderate exercise each day are generally less likely to become depressed or anxious than those who do not. This does not mean that you have to go to the gym. Or run a marathon. Or even get out to attend a yoga class. What we are referring to here is “movement and activity” as this helps the increase of endorphins and the decrease of stress hormones like Cortisol.

HOW TO DO THIS: Walks with your baby, stretching while your baby sleeps or while he/she watches you, vacuuming or other household projects (if you enjoy them), dancing, mild or moderate running, yoga, etc.

4. Building community: Inadequate social support is one of the leading factors in developing depression or anxiety postpartum. Community allows for validation, emotional and logistical support, and company.

HOW TO DO THIS: Have a friend set up a meal train. Join moms groups, group exercise classes, breast feeding clubs, on-line blogs or support networks, couples counseling when needed. Go on date nights (in or outside the home). Tap into your religious or spiritual communities.

5. Breathe: When we are stressed or anxious, most of us are not breathing adequately. When we breathe with our full lung capacity, we give our brains the amount of fresh oxygen that they need to function efficiently.

HOW TO DO THIS: *Diaphragmatic breathing* is the term that is used to describe full belly breathing. In order to achieve this, place your hand on your lower belly and take a deep breath, attempting to bring that breath all the way down to the part of your belly that makes your hand rise and fall. One way to extend this breath is to also notice the space between your inhale and exhale, and your exhale and inhale. This breath takes practice, so be patient with yourself. You might set the goal of 10 deep belly breaths each day. Over time this may become second nature.

6. Deep relaxation strategies: When we are stressed and anxious, we often forget what it feels like to be relaxed. Reminding your body that this is possible is important.

HOW TO DO THIS:

Progressive relaxation: In a lying-down or comfortable position, tense and relax each part of your body either from head-to-toe or from toe-to-head. Notice what it feels like to be tense (in your toes, foot, calf and onward) and then what it feels like to be completely relaxed. When you have gone through each body part in succession, tense and then release your entire body at one. This is often a great tool when having a hard time falling to sleep.

Visualization: Think of or make up a place that gives you the sense of total relaxation. This can be someplace that you have been before or a place that you have dreamed of. Close your eyes and see if you can bring yourself there: What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? What do you smell? What do you taste? While you do this, remember to practice your deep breathing. Notice, sense, and feel how your body reacts to this place. When you have reached a sense of calm and well-being, open your eyes. You can return to this place any time that you need it.

7. Grounding exercises: Often, anxiety (including panic) includes a sense of ungroundedness, floating, or ruminating about the past or future. Reminding yourself to be in the moment can decrease the symptoms that accompany the inability to be present.

HOW TO DO THIS: Notice, and say out loud, where you are in the moment. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? What do you taste? What do you smell? This exercise can take as much or as little time as you have.... But the goal is to bring you back to the moment.

Anyone given any of these a try? Are some easier than others? What gets in your way? If/when you do make some of these things happen, do you notice a difference? We'd love to hear from you....



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