

Help Is Available for Depression Before, During and After Pregnancy

We think of the time that families begin preparing for the arrival of a new baby as a time of joy – filled with hopes, dreams and high expectations for the future. While many women do indeed feel this elation throughout their pregnancy, the truth is that for some women, the periods before, during and after pregnancy are anything but happy. For them, joy is replaced with depression.

Genuine depression is distinctly different than simply being “down”. Everyone occasionally feels “blue” or sad, but these feelings are usually fleeting and pass within a couple of weeks. Up to 80 percent of new mothers cry easily or feel stressed following the birth of a baby. When a woman suffers from true depression, however, it severely interferes with her daily life, causing pain for both the woman and those who care about her. Additionally, the condition can impact the bonding process with her infant, so crucial for proper child development.

Many of us are now familiar with *postpartum depression* (PPD), because New Jersey’s Former First Lady, Mary Jo Codey raised the public’s awareness of the condition and encouraged women to seek help if they experienced lingering feelings of depression and sadness after the birth of a child. Mrs. Codey, herself a survivor of PPD, was a trailblazer nationally for opening the dialog on postpartum depression, which strikes an average of one in eight women. However, people may not realize that depression can occur at any point during pregnancy, not just after the delivery of a child.

Experts have been working to identify the potential causes for a women's increased risk for depression. It is likely that genetic, biological, chemical, hormonal, environmental, psychological, and social factors all intersect to contribute to the condition. While no one knows why it occurs, the important thing is to understand is that depression is treatable, and treatment is available.

Knowing the Signs of Depression

The emotions and pressures experienced by a family before, during or after a pregnancy can be substantial. Family members in particular should remain alert to the possible warning signs of depression. They can play a critical role in helping a woman seek help. While the signs of depression are different for everyone, they can include:

- Feeling exhausted, irritable, angry or nervous
- Crying uncontrollably
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or hopelessness
- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” feelings
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Lack of interest in the baby
- Feelings of being a bad mother
- Thoughts of harming the baby or herself

Once these symptoms are recognized, it is important to seek treatment, because most people with depression will require medical treatment in order to improve.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Depression, even the most severe cases, is a treatable disorder, but as with many illnesses, the earlier that treatment can begin, the more effective it is. A woman's healthcare provider can help assess her condition and refer her for appropriate treatment.

Once diagnosed, a person with depression can be treated through a number of methods, the most common being medication and psychotherapy. Women and their doctors need to consider the potential risks and benefits, and then make a treatment plan based on individual needs and circumstances.

New Jersey Resources

Given the statewide commitment to this effort, women experiencing depression before, during or after their pregnancy are fortunate to have numerous resources available to them. Hospitals across the state screen for postpartum depression, and stress an approach that is sensitive to the cultural and language differences among communities. New Jersey provides a statewide helpline (1-800-328-3838) 24 hours a day, seven days a week to answer questions about perinatal depression and available resources, as well as a comprehensive informational web site at www.njspeakup.gov.

In short, there is no need for a woman to suffer alone with depression. Depression is treatable and help is available.