



As a mother comforts her child, so I
will comfort you.....Isaiah 66:13 (NRSV)

Breaking the Silence: Postpartum Depression and Families of Faith

About This Resource

Breaking the Silence: Postpartum Depression and Families of Faith is an ecumenical resource to educate congregations about postpartum depression to help erase the stigma associated with this illness in our faith communities. The DVD is divided into segments to allow for flexibility of use. Group leaders have the option of viewing individual segments or the entire DVD. This discussion guide provides background information and study questions to accompany each video segment.

DVD SEGMENTS

Introduction (Length: 3:55 minutes)

What is Postpartum Depression? (Length: 7:32 minutes)

Diana's Story (Length: 11:24 minutes)

Toni's Story (Length: 13.06 minutes)

How Faith Communities Can Respond (Length: 7:59 minutes)

What is Postpartum Depression?

Most women believe childbearing is one of life's most significant events. But the birth of a baby is also a major life transition that can be accompanied by a wide range of emotions. There are differences between the "baby blues" (which pass on their own) and postpartum depression (which is a more serious condition).

The "baby blues" are very common after childbirth and affect about 70 to 85 percent of all new mothers. The "baby blues" are caused, in part, by the rapid changes in hormones within a woman's body after giving birth. Fatigue that comes with the healing process and the demands of caring for a new baby also contribute to "baby blues."

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a much more serious condition with symptoms that can negatively affect the mother once her baby is born. These symptoms can change her behavior, personality and outlook. They also affect relationships with the father, family and friends.

The birth of a baby is a time of great joy with our society idealizing motherhood. But women can also find themselves feeling overwhelmed, anxious, stressed and frustrated. They may even have negative feelings toward their child that can make them feel confused and guilty. Many new mothers are ashamed to admit these feelings. They may feel that they are a "bad mother" for having such thoughts. And so they suffer in silence.

Symptoms of Postpartum Depression

At least one in ten new mothers experience various degrees of postpartum depression. These feelings can occur within days after delivery or appear gradually sometimes up to a year or more later.

Symptoms may include:

- Sluggishness, fatigue, exhaustion
- Sadness, depression, hopelessness
worthlessness
- Appetite and sleep disturbances
- Poor concentration, confusion
- Memory loss
- Over concern for the baby
- Uncontrollable crying, irritability
- Lack of interest in the baby
- Guilt, inadequacy, worthlessness
- Fear of harming the baby or yourself
- Exaggerated highs and/or lows
- Lack of interest in sex

When to Get Help and Support

Doctors often do not discuss or prepare expectant mothers about how the change in hormones, sleep deprivation or a colicky baby can cause a whole range of emotions. These emotional changes before and after childbirth are common. The symptoms can vary from very mild to a very severe condition called "postpartum psychosis." This affects less than 1% of new mothers but requires immediate intervention.

Husbands, partners and families can be affected by postpartum depression too. Men also need to seek treatment if they have symptoms that interfere with their day-to-day lives. Despite all the anticipation, the reality of one's responsibility for this baby can be overwhelming.

Women experiencing postpartum depression symptoms should contact their health care professional and get a complete medical evaluation, including a thyroid screening. A skilled doctor can address these concerns and determine if further evaluation or treatment is indicated. Some treatment options include medications, support groups or other types of talk therapy.

The Congregation's Role

Most churches will share the joy of your new baby. There are usually congratulation cards, a rosebud may be put on the altar the following Sunday and casseroles or other offers of support may come the week following the birth. Parishioners ask the mother when they can expect to see her and the baby in church, and plans are often made for baptism in the first few months after the birth. It is the rare church that addresses the emotional aftermath of childbirth.

Do not be afraid to ask for what you need during this time. If family, friends and church members ask how they can help, consider giving them small tasks to do such as bringing meals, household chores, running errands, helping take care of the new baby or other children, educating themselves about these symptoms and spending time with you.

The Opportunities of a Caring Faith Community

Your congregation can support you and your family by:

- Becoming educated about the symptoms of depression
- Help families know it is all right to discuss these issues
- Have information on appropriate community professionals
- Train "mentors" to be assigned to new families for extra support
- Provide spiritual support and assurance

Many parents chose to use the rituals of their faith to welcome their new baby into the church family. Rituals can include baptism, a blessing, a dedication or another ritual when the parents and church family make promises to raise the child in the faith.

Whether or not parents choose to baptize their baby as an infant or child or whether they wait until the child is old enough to profess his or her own faith, the church affirms that every child, and each of us is unique and precious in God's sight. God is already acting in the life of each child even before the child knows it. In the same way, God is present in the lives of each person whether we are aware of it or not. Each person is known by name and loved unconditionally by our Creator.

Questions for Discussion

1. Dr. Tam refers to societal attitudes about "the blissful state of motherhood." In what way can these idealized perceptions about having a new baby cause new mothers to blame themselves for their negative feelings?
2. How is postpartum depression different from the "baby blues?"
3. Have you or anyone you know experienced postpartum depression? Where you able to recognize what was happening?
4. What treatment options are available for PPD?

DIANA'S STORY

1. Diana says everything happened so fast because she had a difficult pregnancy. When did she first recognize that something was wrong?
2. Diana took one of the PPD assessment tests available on some of the websites listed at the end of this guide. Realizing she had a problem, she reached out for help. What treatment choices were most helpful in her gradual recovery?
3. Postpartum depression affects the whole family. Diana's husband felt helpless when he realized her condition was serious. What are some of the things family members can do to help? How can family members receive the support they need?
4. Why did Diana pull back from her church? Why did she return? How was her congregation helpful when she finally shared her struggle with PPD?
5. The turning point in Diana's recovery process was when she finally accepted that she had the illness of postpartum depression. How did her faith help her in coming to this realization and in helping her learn more about herself?
6. Diana says, "I'm not going to be a perfect mom. I'm going to be the best mom I can for my child." What positive changes did Diana make in her life because of her experience with postpartum depression?

TONI'S STORY

1. Tony's postpartum depression symptoms were so severe that she bordered on postpartum psychosis. How did her symptoms progress after the birth of her first child, when she stopped breastfeeding and when she had a miscarriage?
2. From the very beginning Toni feels embarrassed and ashamed of her reaction to the birth of Mitchell. Neither she nor her husband knows what to do. At one point the symptoms become so frightening that Thomas takes Toni to the hospital. What would you do if you knew of a new mother with these symptoms?
3. Toni struggles with the spiritual question of why people suffer. She assumed that God was absent from her in her darkness. How did Pastor Sam help Toni understand that God is present in the midst of her pain?
4. How did members of her church help Toni accept her illness and offer her hope that help was available?
5. Toni's illness responded well to medication and therapy. Toni comes to the realization that the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives are intertwined. Have you had a similar experience in your life?
6. Toni's favorite scripture is, "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17) How did this scripture bring comfort to Toni? What scripture reading has been the most helpful to you during difficult times?

HOW FAITH COMMUNITIES CAN RESPOND

1. Some people told Toni that if she prayed more, read more scripture and spent more time with God, she wouldn't be sick. How did comments like these make Toni feel? Has anyone ever made comments like these to you? How did you feel?
2. Education is the first step to help faith communities understand that postpartum depression is a no-fault illness? What are some things your congregation can do to provide education about postpartum depression?
3. What concrete steps can be taken to reach out to families in crisis? Do your clergy and other congregational leaders have a referral list of mental health professionals in your area?
4. What does the "ministry of presence" mean to you? What are some ways that you can be present without judgment to persons going through a difficult time?

For More Information on PPD

Postpartum Support International (PSI)

www.postpartum.net

The National Women's Health Information Center

www.4woman.gov

Depression After Delivery, Inc.

www.depressionafterdelivery.com

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) website for education about PPD

www.MedEdPPD.org

The National Women's Health Information Center

U.S. Department of Health & Human Resources

<http://www.4women.gov/FAQ/postpartum.htm>

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

www.nami.org

Postpartum Education for Parents

www.sbpep.org

The Ruth Rhoden Craven Foundation for Postpartum Depression Awareness

www.ppdsupport.org

Out of the Valley Ministries, Inc.

www.outofthevalley.org

Mental Health America (MHA)

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

www.stopstigma.samhsa.gov/topics_materials/faith.htm

AAPC: American Association of Pastoral Counselors

<http://www.aapc.org>

The church can be a "vessel of hope" and assurance of God's care, presence and compassion when we go through difficult times. This knowledge can sustain us through our times of fear, uncertainty and confusion. God's promise to never leave us desolate is "amazing grace."

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