

Postpartum Depression: “Did I ruin my life by having a child?”

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“Did I ruin my life by having a child?”

In mid December of last year, I was sitting in the backseat of our car around the block from Barney’s Burgers on Solano Avenue, desperately typing any iteration of this sentence into Google that I could while my infant daughter slept in her car seat beside me and my husband was inside the restaurant spending an exorbitant amount of money on greasy comfort food for us.

“Is my life ruined because I had a baby?”

“When does having a baby get easier?”

“How do I know if I ruined my life if I had a baby?”

“Did I make a mistake in having a baby?”

“Is my career over because I had a baby?”

Like a Magic 8-Ball, I wanted Google to reveal some reassurance that could give me a sliver of hope.

So I kept typing, unhappy with the sparse and not-good-enough results that were popping up.

All the while, I was being quiet as a mouse, mentally willing my six-week-old daughter not to wake up because, when she did, inevitably she would start screaming and 98% of the time it felt like there was nothing we could do to soothe her.

My husband came back with the burgers, fries, and milkshakes, our baby miraculously stayed asleep through the opening and closing of the car door, and we started driving to and through Tilden Park, hoping the motion of the drive would keep her asleep and allow us to eat some food and just be normal for five minutes.

We hadn’t left the house for anything other than a pediatrician appointment and Thanksgiving at our friends since she was born, so the drive through a park that we’d frequented dozens of times pre-baby was supposed to be for fun.

To get out into the world again and be a happy little new family like we were “supposed” to be.

But our daughter woke up ten minutes into the drive and halfway into the burger, and she started howling and screaming again.

I felt defeated. I felt hopeless.

I started comforting my daughter, of course, but really what I wanted to do was more Googling to help get me through my painful thoughts and feelings.

Turning the car around and taking the drive back through the hills to our home as twilight settled, I remember looking out the car window, seeing the pretty, peaceful homes slip by my view, aching with longing and sadness and thinking:

“The person inside that home’s going to sleep tonight.”

“And that other person will sleep tonight, too.”

“That person probably doesn’t have a child so their life is great.”

“I have a baby and I’m never going to sleep again. My life is ruined.”

And that’s when I knew that what I was dealing with was more than The Baby Blues.

I began to suspect I had strayed into the land of Postpartum Depression and that I needed help.

Postpartum Depression is much different than “The Baby Blues”

I’ll share more about my story in a minute but first I want to provide just a little psychoeducation about what Postpartum Depression is and why it’s different than “The Baby Blues” so you can understand why I suspected I was dealing with it and how I got myself support.

The so-called Baby Blues is a normal and natural part of giving birth. With the intensity of the experience, the vacillation of hormones, and navigating into life’s biggest transition, a fluctuation of mood is normal and natural.

The Baby Blues typically last a few weeks and may include experiences like swings of moods, anxiety, sadness, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, crying, trouble sleeping, and changes in appetite.

Again, all of this is normal and natural and a very appropriate response to, again, what I truly think is one of the biggest transitions a woman can make – becoming a mom.

However, when The Baby Blues persist after several weeks, when the symptoms start to increase in severity and intensity, when your experience starts to include depressed mood and severe mood swings, difficulty bonding with your baby, insomnia (even when you get a blessed few hours to sleep!), hopelessness, restlessness, severe anxiety, panic, and/or thoughts of harming yourself or your baby, you’re not just dealing with The Baby Blues anymore.

You're most likely dealing with Postpartum Depression. One experience is normal and natural and fades relatively quickly after the birth.

The other I still think we can call normal and natural, but it's much more severe in nature, more persistent, and it's a complication of birth that can dramatically impact you, your wellbeing, and sometimes your ability to bond with your baby and weather the transition adequately.

I have a lot of advantages in being a licensed therapist and having been in this field for almost ten years to know about Postpartum Depression and to be able to track myself and my emotional experience closely (even in the postpartum hormonal and sleep-deprived haze that made me less than my most grounded, self-aware self!).

But still, even with all my training, self-awareness, and insights into Postpartum Depression, I was probably a few weeks late in getting myself the help I needed.

I'll say more on what help looked like for me in a minute, but first I want to talk about what factors contribute to Postpartum Depression.

What factors contribute to Postpartum Depression?

In some ways, I was inevitably predisposed to Postpartum Depression.

I have a history of depressive episodes in my own life. I have a maternal mental health history of Postpartum Depression. I had a high-risk pregnancy. We had a traumatic birth. We had huge challenges with breastfeeding that ultimately couldn't be bridged. My baby had severe colic (hence her inability to be soothed). And, to top it all off, on the second night after she was born, the 2018 Paradise Fire started here in California which led to us not only smelling smoke in the hospital for the remainder of our stay but also led to us, when we finally got discharged, having to stay indoors and keep all the windows and doors closed to prevent the wildfire smoke and terrible air quality from getting into our baby's lungs (and when we did leave the house to go to the pediatrician, we wore N95 air masks and I had to hold scarves over my baby's nose and mouth). And then when the fires died down, the winter rains came so we were basically stuck inside the house without much social supports around us.

It was a confluence of factors that, even without all the good internal and external supports I had, would have likely added up to Postpartum Depression.

And the context of my own story is validated in the [excellent research on Postpartum Depression](#) that [Dr. Cheryl Tatano Beck](#) has conducted where she identified 13 predisposing variables for Postpartum Depression:

- Prenatal depression;
- Self-esteem;
- Childcare stress;
- Prenatal anxiety;

- Life stress;
- Social support;
- Marital relationship;
- History of previous depression;
- Infant temperament;
- Maternity blues;
- Marital status;
- Socioeconomic status;
- And unplanned/unwanted pregnancy.

(You can read more about Dr. Beck's research and contextualization for these variables [here](#).)

And yet – this is very important! – you don't have to check off all or even any of these thirteen criteria to be predisposed to or to experience Postpartum Depression. You can have a mental health history free of anxiety and depression, an effortless conception, pregnancy, and birth, an easy breastfeeding journey, a baby with an easier temperament, great spousal and social supports, etc. AND you can still experience Postpartum Depression.

Unfamiliarity with and frequent shame in the diagnosis coupled with the insidious nature of the symptoms (they resemble and can be hard to separate from The Baby Blues), often leads to women not seeing themselves in the diagnosis (or predisposition to it) which can lead to a delayed response in seeking out support and getting treatment.

And I'm here to tell you: early treatment of Postpartum depression is *critical*.

Getting support for Postpartum Depression.

So I want to approach this section on treatment in two ways.

If you're already feeling depressed:

- First, I want to tell you that if you're already deep into Postpartum Depression and you're seeing yourself in this article (or even if you have a mild suspicion that this is going on for you), [please contact a therapist](#). If you have an established therapist, call or text them. If you need to find one, Google "Therapist Postpartum Depression" to see what turns up in your area. Book a session with them. [Some therapists offer video sessions](#) so you won't even have to leave your house and baby (super hard to do when you're breastfeeding and on a 2-hour feeding cycle!).
- Next, don't rule out medication. When we're experiencing Postpartum Depression we've gone outside the window of tolerance that our nervous systems can handle. Our brain chemistry is struggling and we may need some additional supports beyond talk therapy. Medication is such a divisive topic but I'm here to tell you as a therapist with a moderate stance on

medication: I've seen it save lives. So, please don't rule this out. Bring it up with your therapist. Call your GP or psychiatrist who can actually prescribe, and explore this with them.

- Tell your partner, your mother, whoever is safe for you, clue them in and let them help you. Postpartum Depression – like so many kinds of suffering – blooms and blossoms in silence. So, very importantly, as you reach out for professional support or even before you do, let someone who loves you and knows you well know what's going on for you. Ask them to help you book that therapy session or find a psychiatrist. Let your loved ones support you.

If you're not yet on or early on in your conception pregnancy journey and you want to create a preventative maternal mental health care plan for yourself, consider the following:

- Loop your healthcare providers in to support you. Talk to your OBGYN, midwife, doula, perinatologist, birth coach, etc about your desire to create a preventative mental health care plan for yourself. Most healthcare providers are excellent about including discussions around mental health into your overall fertility and pregnancy plan but if they don't bring it up, be proactive and start dialoguing about it with them. Ask them what they know can be of support in mitigating the risks for postpartum depression and ally with them to help track you as you journey through the process.
- Have a therapist and a safe therapeutic established relationship beforehand. I'll be honest: looking for a therapist when you're in crisis and a brand new mother who can barely find 5 minutes to shower isn't the ideal time to look for support (but you definitely still can!). Instead, if you want to set yourself up for success, it's always a great idea to have a mental health care team in place *before* crisis hits. That way you have someone who knows you, who's a safe and established expert support who can help you create a robust mental health care support plan and who can be just a text or call away when and if things get hard.
- Talk frankly and openly with your partner about how they could help track you for any signs of Postpartum Depression. The 2018 movie *Tully* angered me when I saw how disengaged and unsupportive her spouse was. THAT is an excellent example of Dr. Beck's "marital relationship" predisposing criterion for Postpartum Depression. But assuming you have a spouse who won't disappear into work and video games to cope with their own overwhelm, ask

them to support your preventative mental healthcare plan by educating themselves on the signs of Postpartum Depression and watching for any of these signs in you.

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- Spend your money liberally on supporting yourself. Look, I know this may not be an option for everyone but if you're privileged enough to have some disposable income (or family willing to help you out on this), please consider budgeting, saving and spending your money liberally on yourself before and after the birth of your child. Spend it on a postpartum doula, grocery and meal delivery, a house cleaner, a night nurse, your own therapy, whatever. Literally use your resources in whatever way you can during the pregnancy and postpartum phase to create ease for yourself in whatever way you can. Obviously, do this responsibly and soberly, but know that there will always be more time to make more money. In my opinion, it's not worth saving pennies to deny yourself help when you may deeply need it in this temporary phase.
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- Consider reducing or eliminating any triggers that may contribute to Postpartum Depression. This will be unique and contextual to your own life but some examples of this may include reducing or ceasing your consumption of news and violent or disturbing TV or movies if you know they contribute to your anxiety levels. This may mean stepping back from social media or holding stronger boundaries with challenging family members. Whatever it looks like for you to reduce additional mental and emotional triggers to support yourself in better managing the enormity of pregnancy, birth, and new motherhood, please do it.

So, what did I do when I realized that what I thought was The Baby Blues had actually turned into Postpartum Depression?

I texted my therapist and booked an immediate session with her. I contacted Kaised to get an appointment with a psychiatrist to explore medication support. I let my husband know that I thought this was Postpartum Depression and I needed extra support. I let my best girlfriends know. I took things day by day with the knowledge that the medication would help bring me back into a window of tolerance so I could actually sleep again. And then the medication kicked in and I could sleep in three-hour chunks which led to a cascade of other improvements in my own well-being. And I did what all new parents do: put one foot in front of the other and move through the blur of those first four months.

And things got better.

So. Much. Better.

Why I wrote this post

I'll be honest: I was hesitant about writing today's post.

There's vulnerability for me in sharing my story so publicly, of course, but the greater part of my hesitancy is a concern that someday my daughter might feel bad or blame herself in some way for me having Postpartum Depression. *Obviously*, she didn't cause it.

And while her having severe colic may have contributed, even without that variable, I was still predisposed.

But, even though it's vulnerable to share more of my story and even though she may someday read this post, I *still* wanted to write this article specifically for any woman who is newly in the postpartum phase, desperately Googling the same or some other iteration of the question "Did I ruin my life by having a child?" to help her.

Look: When we are inside that space of Postpartum Depression, nearly broken for lack of sleep, hormonal shifts, and dysregulated nervous systems, it's easy to imagine that we've ruined our lives by choosing to have a child.

We're deep into a dark tunnel with no way to see the light at the other end. I wanted to write today's post to tell any woman who's suffering and struggling right now precisely what I was desperate to hear when I was sitting in the car, Googling for answers and waiting for greasy comfort food to numb my feelings a year ago:

*You did NOT ruin your life by having a child. You are in the midst of one of the most challenging times of your life and, from inside this place, you really can't think or see clearly. It may *feel* like your life is over right now but I promise you it isn't. Not actually. It will look different moving forward now that you're a mother, it won't look like it did before, but it's also *not* always going to look and feel like it does right now. This incredibly hard time will pass – but you need to get yourself help so it can pass! – and things will likely feel so much better. Maybe when your baby is 4 months old, or 6, or 8 or 10, or maybe longer than that. But trust me, you will have a life again, and it will include your amazing little baby, and it will be a good life. But first, honey, if you're asking yourself this question, please realize you may need some extra support right now.*

"You did NOT ruin your life by having a child."

I wouldn't have believed this myself when I was in the thick of my Postpartum Depression but, just this past week, my daughter turned one and I can tell you with every cell in my body that she's the love of my life and the best thing that I've ever done or will ever do in my life.

As opposed to her ruining my life, she's made it indescribably better, bigger, richer, and more magical.

I couldn't see my way out of the dark tunnel during those first few months of her life, convinced I had ruined my career, my health, and my happiness, but she's the center of my everything now.

Her panoply of wacky facial expressions, her infectious laugh, her obsession with her stuffed panda and playing peek-a-boo around the corner of the couch, how she constantly points and asks "Dat?" as she's trying to figure out the world, and how she's decided recently that spoons are dumb and the best way to eat her food is to put it on top of her sippy cup and bring it to her mouth and chew it from there... She's magic.

And far from ruining my career, I've never felt more inspired, focused and driven in my life. I also feel happy and filled with meaning and purpose and so, so much love.

Am I still tired? Yes, of course: I'm a working mom. But do I feel the same way I did in those first few months of her life? Not at all.

So for anyone out there Googling, wondering if things will get better, I want to say this to you:

Hang in there. It WILL get better. But in order for it to do so, you NEED to get yourself some support. A flashlight and guide to steer you through the dark tunnel right now, however that looks. Please reach out and get that support for yourself. You're so worth it.

Warmly, Annie

<https://www.anniewrightpsychotherapy.com>