

Am I an Overwhelmed New Mom, or Is It Postpartum Anxiety?



■ by Laura Goossens, MSW, LCSW

You come home from the hospital, exhausted, stitched up, in a daze, and suddenly in charge of a little human life; what's there not to be nervous about? When you become a new mom, you don't know what the norm should feel like, and it's hard to navigate all of your overwhelming thoughts and emotions. Yet sometimes your nervousness is more than just nervousness and is a mental health disorder called postpartum anxiety. You have probably heard of postpartum depression, but you may have never heard of postpartum anxiety before. Even though I am a mental health counselor, I had never heard of postpartum anxiety until I experienced it after my first son was born over five years ago.

What Symptoms Should You Be Looking For?

Symptoms include but are not limited to constantly worrying, intrusive thoughts, insomnia, restlessness, irritability, rage, and feelings of impending doom. When I struggled with postpartum anxiety I had feelings of paranoia, insomnia, and impending doom. I felt keyed up, on edge, and would wake up at 3 AM and wouldn't be able to go back to sleep no matter how hard I tried. I remember lying there in bed looking at my sleeping baby and stressing over the fact that I couldn't sleep when my baby was finally asleep. The worst part about it was that nothing would ease the anxiety. I couldn't even function enough to use any of my normal coping skills to help get me through. I had no idea what was wrong with me and couldn't find anything to help. In my quest for answers in what was going on, I reached out to an online moms' group about what I was experiencing. A fellow mom sent me information on postpartum anxiety, and it described exactly what I was facing.

What Do You Do?

When I finally figured out what was going on, I went to see my doctor who prescribed medication. I didn't know how to feel about it because I had never taken medication for mental health before, but I was so desperate to feel like myself again, I didn't care what kind of stigma there was. Medication was a game changer. It didn't take away the anxiety altogether, but took the edge off enough so I could function enough to use coping skills and relaxation techniques to manage.

I found prayer and Scripture very helpful as I learned how to cope with my anxiety. I would pray to God for strength, confess my feelings of weakness, and ask Him to remind me that He was by my side through it all. Prayer ended up being a continual moment-by-moment conversation with God, sometimes a long prayer of exasperation and feelings of being overwhelmed, other times a desperate "help me" in the middle of all the chaos in my mind. Reading Scripture also helped remind me of the truths and promises

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that were mine to hold onto. Anxiety will lie to you and tell you that you aren't safe when you actually are safe, and having the truth of God's word is such a powerful tool of defense when your mind is fighting against these lies. I held on to verses such as:

- "The Lord himself will fight for you. Just stay calm." Exodus 14:14 (NLT)
- "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand." Isaiah 41:10 (NLT)
- "Each time he said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me." 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NLT)

Exercise was another helpful coping tool. I went running a lot. When I would run, I would forget about the world for a moment, then come home with a whole batch of endorphins that would help me feel strong again. Along with running, I would always be listening to music to help me relax. I would have music on when I was cooking, cleaning, changing diapers, and just hanging with the baby. I listened to a lot of worship music, because worship would always help me to keep my mind on all the good and remind myself that I am loved by a God who is in control of it all.

As hard as it felt to get out of the house at times with a new baby, I made it a priority to spend time with friends and opened up to them about my struggles. My friends provided empathy and support and made me feel less alone in it all. I felt like I had an army of friends standing behind me, friends who didn't judge my struggles but were there to help in any way they could. Through all of this help, over time I started to feel like myself again, and that felt like a miracle.

Although I didn't end up seeing a therapist in my journey, I believe that seeing a therapist is also beneficial while navigating through postpartum anxiety. A therapist can help you challenge negative and irrational thoughts, teach you relaxation techniques, and help you communicate your needs to your support system. One of the best aspects of therapy is having an outside person that provides a safe space to explore the thoughts and feelings that are often difficult to say to those directly in your life.

Husbands, What Can You Do?

I remember going through a birthing class before my oldest was born and the teacher talked to the husbands about keeping a lookout for symptoms of postpartum depression. She said oftentimes the wives are so far deep in their mental health struggles that they aren't aware they are struggling with a disorder. This is the same for postpartum anxiety. I had no idea I was struggling until I got to a place where I couldn't feel like I could function again. My husband had to be the one to express that what I was going through wasn't normal motherhood nervousness. As a husband, if you notice your wife struggling, don't be afraid to speak up and try to help advocate for her needs when she is struggling to do so for herself. Encourage her to seek help from a medical and mental health professional. Also, help her get out of the house with friends, take a nap, go for a walk, or whatever you know helps her relax.

In the past few years, I have seen more information starting to come out about postpartum anxiety, and I continue to come across more moms who have also struggled with this disorder. I am passionate in talking about my experience with postpartum anxiety in hopes of providing more awareness to the issue and help more moms feel less alone in their struggle during such a difficult time as those early motherhood days. ■

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