

Do You Have These Signs of Postpartum OCD?

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By Chaunie Brusie, RN



Many women have heard of postpartum depression, but may not be as familiar with postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder, or postpartum OCD.

Sometimes, OCD can start while you are still pregnant, just like depression, a condition called perinatal OCD. You may even have OCD prior to pregnancy as well, but the hormones, stress, and life changes of pregnancy and bringing a baby into the world may just make it more apparent, leading to an actual diagnosis.

What Is Postpartum OCD?

According to the OCD Center of Los Angeles, postpartum OCD occurs in approximately 3-5 percent of new mothers. Like any other type of OCD, a mother with postpartum OCD struggles with repetitive, compulsive behavior that she feels she has no control over. In postpartum OCD, however, the compulsions usually center around harm to her baby. A mother may obsess about her baby getting hurt or even obsess about being afraid of somehow hurting her baby herself.

What Are the Signs of Postpartum OCD?

Postpartum OCD usually manifests itself very quickly, within a week or so of giving birth. A mother will focus on things such as:

- The baby dying from SIDS
- Dropping the baby
- The fear of putting the baby in a strange place, such as the microwave or oven
- Constant, recurring images of the baby dead
- The impulse to shake the baby, even if the thought is horrifying to hear
- Visions or thoughts of hurting the baby, such as stabbing the baby

- Drowning the baby

Although many fears are normal parts of motherhood, postpartum OCD is more when those fears and compulsions take over every aspect of your life or when you feel like your thoughts are controlling you. For example, many mothers with OCD will have trouble sleeping at night, even when the baby is asleep, because they are constantly checking to make sure the baby is alive.

OCD may also manifest in compulsive behaviors that the mother thinks will protect her baby such as constantly praying and seeking reassurance from others or a doctor. And finally, some mothers may actually fear taking care of their baby by themselves, so great is their fear that something will happen to the baby. They will avoid being left alone or not trust themselves to take care of their baby.

Finding Help for Postpartum OCD

Fortunately, postpartum OCD is very treatable. The first step with any sort of postpartum mental health disorder should be to talk to your OB/GYN or primary care provider, who can help refer you to a mental health specialist. Your doctor may know of an expert who specializes in treatment and can help give you a referral for insurance purposes.

Treatment may include seeing a therapist, who can prescribe different forms of cognitive therapy, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy. These types of therapy focus on "re-training" your brain to manage the unhealthy behaviors. Your doctor may also prescribe individual and group therapy, or recommend medications that can help. In some cases, postpartum OCD may be temporary and in others, you may have to learn to manage your OCD even after your baby is grown.

What is important to remember, however, no matter what you may be experiencing, is that the postpartum period can be a time in a woman's life when she is at high risk for mental health disorders. It may be postpartum depression or it may be OCD, but either way, the struggles you are experiencing are nothing to be ashamed of or to be silent about. The hormonal changes of pregnancy, breastfeeding, and sleep deprivation can simply cause things in our brain to be "off" and mental health changes after having a baby are a medical complication of pregnancy just like gestational diabetes or mastitis would be.

The bottom line is that if you have any suspicion that something is just not right about your mental health after having a baby, please seek help because treatment is readily available.

Souces:

The International OCD Foundation. (2016) Beyond the Blues: Postpartum OCD. <https://iocdf.org/expert-opinions/postpartum-ocd/>.
OCD Center of Los Angeles. (2016). Perinatal/Postpartum OCD: Symptoms and Treatments. <http://ocdla.com/postpartum-ocd>.