

Hit by the baby blues

Most women associate the birth of a child with great joy, but the reality is that for more than one in 10 Australian women, motherhood brings unwanted thoughts and feelings and often a sense of despondency.

Postnatal depression (PND) can occur at any time in the first year, but the literature suggests that mothers are very susceptible when their baby is four to six months old.

So how do we know if a mother is suffering from PND? Physical changes include consistently depressed mood, irritability, changes in appetite or weight, sleeping difficulties and feelings of extreme tiredness and lethargy, more than the tiredness you would expect after baby-related disturbed nights.

There are also emotional changes that accompany the physical ones. Feeling inadequate and experiencing a total inability to cope, loss of interest in sex and the outside world and feelings of hostility or indifference towards your partner may mean PND.

Other emotional changes include overwhelming anxiety about things that caused no concern before, difficulty making decisions, and obsessive fears about baby's wellbeing.

Guilt is often another feature because mothers may feel guilty they are not coping when other mothers seem to, or they may feel guilty that they miss their pre-baby life and don't experience overwhelming feelings of love for their baby that mothers say they feel.

PND risk factors include earlier experiences of depression or a family history of it, lack of social support, a premature or ill baby, long-term relationship difficulties, difficult labour, financial strain and being a first-time mother later in life.

Becoming a mother is a significant change in a woman's life. Alongside the physical effect of childbirth is the realisation that suddenly you are responsible for a vulnerable human being who communicates mostly by crying.

Motherhood can also result in loss of career, money and personal freedom, though this is often not acknowledged.

Confide in your maternal-health nurse or GP and get help from organisations with expertise in this area, such as the Post and Ante-Natal Depression Association (PANDA).

Talking about what you are going through in a safe space is a huge step towards recovery, and couple counselling will help if there are relationship difficulties.

Survival tips

- **Contact your GP or maternal and child-health nurse**
- **Seek help from organisations such as PANDA ph: 1300 726 306**
- **Visit www.beyondblue.org.au**

