

# **Postpartum: The Transition into Motherhood**

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The long-awaited contractions of labor have finally come and gone and you now have in your arms the baby you have nourished and grown to love over the last nine months. But life may not be as you expected it to be. You may find yourself at one moment elated and in the next deeply depressed. Are you crazy? No, you are postpartum: a tender and fragile condition full of all kinds of changes, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. If you, like most women after birth, feel a bit confused about all that is going on in your life, take heart and know that this is a time of tremendous growth. How long will it last? It varies from woman to woman, but anywhere from four weeks to a year is certainly normal. The more physical help you can get, especially in the weeks right after the birth, the better; good reason to choose a Doula and organize your postpartum support system. Joining a postpartum support or infant play group can also help alleviate the stresses that inevitable arise from new parenthood.

Described herein are some of the classic changes that women go through after having a baby. If you are reading this before birth, be aware that probably some, but not all of them will happen to you. If you are reading it after birth, use it as a guide for reassurance that you are not alone in your feelings and that there are some very good reasons for them. This is a fertile time to explore the social, emotional and spiritual dimensions of your experience. On the physical level it is a time to learn about interdependence, both in your relationship to your body and your baby, and also in relationship to the world around you. *Honor this time and acknowledge the depth of your changes.* The more you can accept them, the smoother your transition will be.

## **PHYSICALLY...**

Birth is extremely hard work; it isn't called labor for nothing. Even if you had a "short, easy labor", your body has gone through an intense physical process, the effects of which will not be totally resolved for at least six weeks. In addition, the demands of caring for a new baby can cause further strain and leave you with sensations you had not anticipated and are surprised to be experiencing. Fatigue is probably the most pervasive of these, in the beginning from the delivery and soon from the physical exigencies of mothering. It's amazing, for instance, how heavy seven or eight pounds of baby can feel in your arms after a short period of time; how tired your back and shoulders might begin to feel. More significantly, the feeding schedules of newborns mean that you rarely get more than two or three hours of sleep at a time, leaving you in a state of semi-consciousness known as sleep deprivation. The only treatment for this kind of fatigue is to rest as much as possible and sleep whenever you can: when the baby sleeps, use your time to rest and save other tasks for times when the baby is awake but not needing your full time attention.

Many women are surprised to find themselves quite sensitive to temperature, hunger, and thirst. If you consider the physical process of birth – the opening of the cervix and then the pushing out of baby and placenta – you see how the body has become physically quite vulnerable, opened to the outside and not really closed down until six weeks postpartum. Having been "opened to the core", it makes sense that you would chill easily and be more sensitive to the stimulus of your environment and the world around you. The immediacy of hunger and thirst you experience are also a function of recovery from birth as your body works to replace the fluids lost and resources used in the powerful process of birth. Nursing mothers will be especially affected by powerful sensations of hunger and thirst. Be sure to listen to your body's cues and eat good nutritious food and take in plenty of fluids. Aside from the increased nutritional and fluid intake needs of your body as it makes and adjusts the supply of milk for the baby, some women may experience tender nipples or occasional engorgement until the cycle of breastfeeding is well established. Furthermore, unpredictable things may happen like your milk letting down in the middle of grocery shopping or the baby wanting to snooze when your breasts seem full to the bursting point. Flexibility, patience, and a sense of humor will do much to get you over these hurdles.

Other common physical realities of the postpartum period include aftercramps, body aches (especially in the back), and more noticeable body odor. Some women experience increased hair loss postpartum, as well. Aftercramps are a normal part of involution, the process of the uterus returning to its pre-pregnant size. They are contractions, not unlike the Braxton-Hicks

contractions of pregnancy, but some women, particularly with successive babies, find them rather painful. Body aches, particularly in the back and pelvic regions, are quite common after birth. The bones have had to move some in order to make room for the baby to pass through the pelvis. In addition, the shift in weight from a big belly out in front prenatally, to larger breasts and the baby carried in the arms or higher on the torso in a sling postpartum, contributes to changes in posture and possible misalignment of the spine. For this reason many birth practitioners routinely recommend seeing a chiropractor after birth. A massage is also a wonderful way to release some of the physical tensions of the post partum period. As for an increase in body odor, this is a part of the bonding process and is really only noticeable to the baby and her mother. The newborn baby, like other baby creatures, relies partly on her sense of smell to tell her about the world she has entered. The odor of her mother's body helps her identify who she is and its absence lets her know she is in the arms of someone else. As the hormones of pregnancy and birth decrease and get closer to pre-pregnant levels, body odors also return to normal. Hair loss postpartum can also be disturbing. Many women find their hair is thicker and shinier during pregnancy only to begin falling out at an alarming rate after the baby is a few weeks old. Normally, we all lose a fair number of hairs each day, but during pregnancy, high hormone levels keep it from falling out nearly so much. After the baby is born, and hormones return to normal, falling hair seems to make up for lost time, but it does grow back.

For those who have never given birth before, this must seem like an endless list of maladies. In actual fact, different women experience their bodies' adjustments differently, some more intensely and some less so. The idea in presenting them is to help prepare you for the possibilities and to assure you that they are normal and that other women experience and survive them too.

## **EMOTIONALLY...**

Unlike the physical changes experienced by postpartum mothers, the emotional changes are not so easy to quantify. In our all-so-logical society we tend to assume we are crazy if we go through very intense emotional changes rather than accepting them as a part of our normal cycle of development. Postpartum is a time of such radical changes, no matter how many babies you've had, that keeping up with them is often a matter of balancing gains and losses. This applies for both men and women (fathers also experience a postpartum transition) and the relative smoothness of these changes depends to some degree on your ability to accept the seeming paradox that a loss is a gain and vice versa. For example, in giving birth you lose the pregnancy and all the positives and negatives it brought with it, including the "ideal baby" you dreamed of before he was born, tiny, sweet, adorable...what you gain is a small person who depends upon you utterly and who responds to you in a multi-dimensional relationship in which the "ideal baby" couldn't engage.

Your sense of personal identity and boundaries may be the next thing to go. In the early days of motherhood, it is sometimes difficult to know where the baby ends and you begin. Your body and your emotions are different than they've ever been, and so are your priorities. Suddenly, nothing you cared about before is nearly as important as that little person nursing at your breast. What you gain is a growing sense of connectedness with mothers the world over and a physical and emotional commitment to your child which nearly bowls you over with its intensity. You seem to lose your girl-self ~ the carefree, playful, spontaneous side of you ~ what you receive in return is your mother-self, a facet of womanhood which will bring a greater depth of insight, wisdom and responsibility than your girl-self was capable of.

Many women find themselves at a loss intellectually for some time after giving birth. Lactating mothers especially notice that they don't "think as clearly" as they used to, or they don't seem to be able to pay attention like before. Much of this is hormonal, and once the body returns to its pre-pregnant state (you resume menstruation), the fuzziness goes away. Another way of looking at it, however, is that this is a time to explore other ways of thinking and relating. For instance, your baby is extremely non-verbal, and if you try to relate to him as you would an adult, with intellectual discourse, you will quickly find yourself frustrated. New mothers will often comment in amazement that they have a kind of communication with their baby which goes beyond (or comes before) words, where they know on an intuitive level what the baby is thinking, feeling or reacting to. It is this kind of relating that dominates the postpartum period, and the more it is accepted and valued for what it is, the easier it is to cope with fuzziness at the level of logic and

rationality. In a similar vein, women who are used to thinking of themselves as highly productive members of society can suffer a loss of self esteem. Before having a baby, what they did in a day was quantifiable and this was a part of how they judged their self-worth. Taking care of a baby, on the other hand, is not so quantifiable, and those things that can be measured, like how many smiles you exchanged, how many diapers you changed, or how many loads of laundry you folded, are hardly the kinds of things we consider worthwhile achievements. The more nebulous achievements of raising a child are often difficult to validate since they are not honored in our culture other than nostalgically on the second Sunday in May. In many ways our society needs to change its thinking, but until it does, it is important that mothers acknowledge, to themselves and to each other, the work they do as a creative act. After all and this is the corresponding gain, what could be more monumental than the creation and shaping of a human being?

One of the most puzzling and disturbing experiences many women have during the postpartum period is the temporary loss of their emotional stability. The hormonal changes of pregnancy, birth, and lactation, in addition to the new stresses of mothering a newborn, precipitate mood swings that most women don't normally experience. One moment you may be blissfully gazing at your precious infant, knowing that your life is perfect and exactly how you hoped and planned for it to be and half an hour later, you may be sobbing and feeling like nothing will ever be the same again. Or you may be fine until you pick up the newspaper and read a story of a tragedy or an instance of man's inhumanity to man which makes you weepy for the rest of the day. This is normal, and it is common to almost all postpartum women. Another common occurrence is feeling emotionally attached to the doctor, midwife, or nurse who gave you support during birth. This makes perfect sense for two reasons: that person gave you attention and help when you were the most vulnerable you've ever been, and she or he was with you during the time when nature intended for you to fall in love with your baby, a phenomena which can extend to include anyone in your presence at the time. This attachment can be troublesome since in most cases your birth attendant isn't someone you can continue to have a relationship with, but fortunately, it usually disappears after a few weeks. The emotional sensitivity and open-heartedness women experience postpartum can offer a precious opportunity and stimulus to reach out and connect with friends and family in a new way.

As alluded to above, postpartum women may experience changes in their emotional relationships with others. Postpartum is a time of great vulnerability and need, when the new mother gets to learn how much she depends upon the help, support and companionship of her partner, her relatives, other women and even strangers. For a formerly independent person, this can be a very difficult adjustment. At home alone with a new baby, she may feel very much like she needs some attention and mothering herself. This is one reason the human race lived for millennia in extended family settings: because we need each other. In the nuclear age, with our nuclear families, we are isolated and unused to asking for help. Everyone wants to be independent and nobody wants to impose on anyone. Postpartum is one of those times when you realize that you will have to ask for and accept help in ways you never would have done before. If you are able to do so, what you gain in the diminishing of your independence is a network of support and interdependence that will nourish you now and in times to come.

## **Socially...**

As a woman having just given birth, you are experiencing a new reality of yourself, and it follows that you will see changes in your role as wife, daughter, and friend. Those you relate to in these roles may respond differently as well and you may find your relationships change as your interactions are transformed to fit the new context of your life. In general, the more intimate the relationship, the more intense the changes will be.

The most obvious relationship to change will be that between you and your mate, especially with your first baby. You will begin to see each other in a new light, as the parents of your baby, and baby-gazing will begin to take its place among the activities you enjoy together. Instead of deciding where to go for dinner, you will negotiate agreements about things like who will change the baby when and who will get up with her when she needs to be rocked in the middle of the night. Another change women experience in relation to their mates involves dependence as mentioned above. Especially in our feminist times, it can be very difficult to let your partner know, or even acknowledge to yourself, that you feel a need to be protected. This is not a step

back into caveman times, but a perfectly natural response exhibited by many animal mothers, who often remain hidden for a time in nests, dens, or burrows while the mate provides food and defense. Because our human world is so much more complex, our needs for protection are of a broader yet more subtle nature. The degree to which mother and father can come to terms with her vulnerability and need for protection will influence the nature of this new phase of their relationship.

It is often the case that communication and contact between parents gets put on the back burner when they are so busy attending to the baby's needs, or exhausted from doing so, that they have no energy left for each other. New fathers, especially, seem to find themselves feeling left out or jealous, and then feel ashamed and chastise themselves for having such feelings. It is important in all phases of parenting, but especially in the beginning, to make time to reaffirm the couple side of your relationship. Parents are lovers, too. Take the time to let each other know, emotionally and physically, that you still really love and care for each other.

Which leads to the question of sex postpartum which needs a whole article to itself because there are so many issues concerning body image, fatigue, physical comfort, etc. The clinical facts are that intercourse is fine about three to six weeks after delivery. By this time the woman has usually stopped bleeding which is a sign that her cervix is fully closed and she is no longer open to infection through the vagina. Whether she *feels* ready at this point is another matter. Her body has gone through so many changes since the birth that it can take some time to feel comfortable and at one with it. In addition, the physical needs of the baby are so great that a woman can end up feeling that her husband's sexual needs, no matter how much she would like to participate, are just one more demand she must meet, but maybe can't for awhile. The best remedy for this situation is patience, along with honesty and good communication; if there is lots of love and caring on both sides, the transition of postpartum sexuality usually works itself out fairly well. It also may be best for the woman to initiate the first few sexual encounters, to go slowly and gently, and to use a lubricating jelly as the hormones of the lactation process can affect vaginal secretions.

Another intimate relationship that changes after birth is your relationship with your baby. He is no longer inside, self-contained and basically controllable. He now has a will of his own and a voice to let you know about it, and in some ways he seems to be controlling *you*. He cries and your milk lets down, you want to sleep and he's very much awake and wanting your attention. It can sometimes feel like a tug-of-war just to get a chance to go to the bathroom or fix yourself something to eat. Talking on the phone or taking a shower are even harder. You will find it difficult to be any great distance from your baby. In the beginning, just having him in another room is too far. You feel your baby's vulnerability and perhaps your inability to protect him as well as you could before he was born. Simple things like driving in the car can seem frightening because you are exposing your baby to a potentially dangerous situation. The resolution of these questions is simply a matter of time and of getting used to sharing your life so intimately with another being.

With regard to relationships with friends, you will discover that while some will adapt to the new realities of your life, others will not and you will drift apart. This can be painful and disappointing, and you may feel rejected or abandoned. On the other hand, you may feel uncomfortable around certain friends if you sense that they are nervous or impatient with you, and you may find conversation and activities you previously enjoyed rather irrelevant. Friends who have children will be more understanding and naturally you will find you have more in common with them. It takes a very special person to be able to adjust to the pace and concerns of a new parent if she hasn't been through it herself. The ones who can are quite valuable, but don't be surprised when you find yourself inclining more towards friends, new or old, with kids, and therefore interests, more like your own.

The last major set of relationships which are impacted by having a baby are those with your families of origin. From your parents in particular you will find that you really need their emotional support and validation that you can and will be a good parent. You may have noticed during your pregnancy that you were identifying more with your parents, especially with your mother and her pregnancy with you. This is a time when you need their love; often old rifts are mended and you are able to forgive their transgressions as parents as you face the possibility of

making mistakes with your own kids. Often what you need to know most of all, particularly when the responsibility of parenthood seems very heavy on your shoulders, is that you are still their child that you are loved and can come home and be nurtured for an hour or a day or a week. Moms need mothering too, as do dads, and we all need to know that our parents are there for us on some level as we embark on the voyage they began when they had us. If there is any way to connect with your parents around the birth of your baby, do. A new baby is wonderfully healing and brings out what we all have in common; it is a special time for everyone, since the family is growing and the bloodline is being extended yet one more generation into the future.

## **SPIRITUALLY...**

Many women find themselves moved in labor in a manner that they have never experienced before. Some feel that in confronting life through birth, they have confronted death. Others reach into themselves and find a source of strength they didn't know they had. Many find that their major life issues are right in front of them and cracked wide open through the birth experience. No one who has attended or given birth can deny the profound feelings engendered by the bringing forth of new life. For the birthing mother, these feelings can be overwhelming and in the days and weeks following birth she often finds herself reflecting on the significant issues that came up during her labor and delivery. Just as a woman can experience physical and emotional openness postpartum, so too can she feel spiritually open: some women feel that the physical opening up which lets the baby out is a metaphor for a spiritual rebirth which is the true inner experience. Many women feel a deep love for all humanity, born of woman, and a profound connection with all women who have born children throughout the ages and around the world. The flip side of this feeling can be anger and pain that we continue to send the sons of our bodies to war and that we daily wreak destruction on the earth, mother of us all. Every postpartum woman has her own set of thoughts and revelations to sort through, and these can sometimes be confusing. The best thing to do is to find someone caring and understanding to talk with who will listen and help you see what it is you are trying to learn from the experience. This level of thought and feeling does not happen often in our lives. It needs to be acknowledged and encouraged in order for us to resolve the complex issues that are brought up. Keep yourself in a calm and safe environment; do not let too much of the world in too soon. It is important to protect this special state you are in so that it can do the work it is intended to do at all its various levels. Finally, consider and take comfort in these words called down out of the ancient wisdom by a midwife-poet:

Roller Coaster  
in the few short weeks after birth  
woman's roller coaster of emotions  
and reverb perceptions  
and deep flowing hormones  
go from a far away place  
it took nine months  
and a slow motion implosion of body birth  
to come to  
and which it will take a slight six weeks  
in some corners of her borders  
to return to  
while the rest of her will continue to change  
faraway  
as she follows the nursling at her breast  
we must take care of her  
she is wide open and spinning away  
she is the caretaker of an angel  
- Karen Hope Ehrlich