

## Baby Blues

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My wife and I welcomed our 6th child to our family a little over 3 weeks ago. At 41 weeks gestation, his was the longest pregnancy we had experienced. The labour itself was reasonably quick; after having driven to the hospital and arriving at 11pm on a Friday night, the time of birth was recorded at 23:47. What happened immediately afterwards was unexpectedly traumatic, however, as my wife became paralysed with severe pain, probably a result of the intravenous drip she was receiving which contained syntocinon. Our son was 7 or 8 hours old by the time my wife had the chance to hold him for the first time, after having been administered a spinal anaesthetic to suture a tear and remaining in a state of crippling pain. Thankfully I was able to hold him the whole time, but especially for my wife this was not the start to our son's life

that we had expected.

I'm really proud of my wife. She has been really brave in dealing with the sadness of not being able to hold our baby skin-to-skin moments after his birth. We were sad that his first feed was not from my wife's breast but from a bottle containing formula milk. Instead of being able to ask for delayed clamping of the umbilical cord until the pulsing stopped, the cord was cut almost immediately as my wife was too delirious to notice what was going on. While we're incredibly grateful that our son is healthy and is doing really well now, there was a sadness and disappointment that his first hours of life weren't as we had hoped. As a bloke, I suppose I just digested this and was happy to move onto the more familiar territories of caring for a newborn. I was a little startled, however, by how my wife needed some more time and effort to rationalise what had happened and emotionally deal with it.

I say a *little* startled as, of course, any emotional reaction can be alarming. But it didn't come as a complete surprise. My wife has felt hormonal, weepy and sensitive in the days and weeks after the birth of our previous children. You can imagine that after the exhaustion of labour, the sleepless nights that accompany the interrupted routine of caring for a newborn don't allow time for recovery. As the husband, I feel a powerful sense of duty to support and protect my wife after our baby is born, and helping her get adequate rest is a part of that. With other children to look after, it's not easy to offer the full support she might need. So the stress of caring for a newborn, coupled with any other emotional stimuli, can lead to the baby blues.



The baby blues are quite common amongst mothers of newborns. It's perfectly natural and quite normal. There are many chemical and hormonal changes that occur during and after labour which can make the mother quite emotionally sensitive. I think this is important for husbands to be aware of – especially for those couples who don't have children yet – so that when the wife experiences some of the baby blues, the husband and new father should be prepared to support his wife.

It's worth making a distinction between baby blues, which is incredibly common, and postnatal depression (PND). Some women can have PND and not be aware of it, but it's remarkably common, affecting around 10% of all mothers. Mothers who have had past mental health problems may have an increased risk of developing PND, but it may affect women

who have been otherwise healthy mentally. It can occur suddenly or develop gradually and it may exhibit a variety of different symptoms. The baby blues are not, however, the same thing as PND. A mother with baby blues might feel like crying for no apparent reason. She might worry about the baby's health, even if the baby is perfectly fine. She might be tired but unable to sleep, or she might be unable to concentrate. The experience of these emotions is challenging, but it's not an illness, it's just part of the ups and downs of life.

So, what advice do I have for husbands, or others, if a mother is experiencing the baby blues? Firstly, help her to sleep. For my wife, rest is really important so I try to let her get as much sleep as possible. I like to take the baby in the early hours of the morning and watch a film while pacing up and down allowing baby to sleep. It's an efficient arrangement!

Also, do lots of cooking! There were quite a few meals in the freezer that simply needed to be reheated when my wife wanted them. Even my brother and his wife made some food that went into our freezer, for which my wife and I were very grateful.

My wife doesn't like having lots of visitors in the first few weeks after baby is born. I must admit I have a strong desire to welcome the whole world to come visit in order to see my latest progeny, but I hold off for a few weeks allowing my wife time to bond with baby. Plus you never know what germs people are incubating, so keeping guests away also maintains a healthy home.

It's important to tell mama what a great job she's doing. I'm seriously proud of my wife and her motherliness is something I celebrate whenever I have the chance. If she's having an episode of the blues I just remind her how incredible she is and reassure her that she will be fine. If she wants to cry, let her cry, there's nothing wrong in crying. And if she wants to share her heart, I'll happily listen. That's what I'm there for.

Parenting is a collaborative effort. A baby has both a father and a mother. As the father, I do sometimes feel a bit useless. I don't carry the baby for 9 months, I don't give birth to the baby, I can't breastfeed the baby. The baby is pretty much the wife's concern. But I can change nappies. I can hold baby on my shoulder, pacing while burping the baby. But most of all I can be my wife's number 1 fan, her cheerleader and supporter. In helping her to be the mum I know God made her to be, I can be a supportive husband and proud father.



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