



## ANXIETY DURING PREGNANCY AND AFTER CHILDBIRTH

### RESOURCES: Organizations

#### U-M Women's Mental Health Program

[www.psych.umich.edu/wmh](http://www.psych.umich.edu/wmh)  
1-800-525-5188

#### Anxiety Disorders Association of America

[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)

#### International OCD Foundation

[www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org)

#### Postpartum Support International (PSI)

[www.postpartum.net](http://www.postpartum.net)  
1-800-944-4773

#### The Postpartum Stress Center

[www.postpartumstress.com](http://www.postpartumstress.com)

#### Postpartum Depression Support Group of the Greater Ann Arbor Area

[www.ppd-annarbor.org](http://www.ppd-annarbor.org)  
734-418-2683

#### National Suicide Prevention Hotline

1-800-273-TALK

### RESOURCES: Books

*The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*  
Edmund J. Bourne

*Dropping the Baby and Other Scary Thoughts:  
Breaking the Cycle of Unwanted Thoughts in  
Motherhood*  
Karen Kleiman and Amy Wenzel

*Overcoming Postpartum Depression and Anxiety*  
Linda Sebastian

*When Survivors Give Birth: Understanding and  
Healing the Effects of Early Sexual Abuse on  
Childbearing Women*  
Penny Simkin and Phyllis Klaus

*Survivor Moms: Women's Stories of Birthing,  
Mothering and Healing after Sexual Abuse*  
Mickey Sperlich and Julia S. Seng

*The Pregnancy and Postpartum Anxiety Workbook:  
Practical Skills to Help You Overcome Anxiety,  
Worry, Panic Attacks, Obsessions, and Compulsions*  
Pamela S. Wiegartz and Kevin L. Gyoerkoe



#### U-M Ambulatory Psychiatry and Depression Center

Rachel Upjohn Building  
4250 Plymouth Rd.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-5763  
734-764-0231

[www.psych.med.umich.edu](http://www.psych.med.umich.edu)  
[www.depressioncenter.org](http://www.depressioncenter.org)

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09/2011-1.5K/A





**Are you worrying excessively?**

**Do you have horrible thoughts about harm coming to your child?**

**Are you suffering from panic attacks?**

**Do you have flashbacks or nightmares?**

**Are your loved ones concerned about you?**

***You are not alone.***

Pregnancy, childbirth, and raising a new baby can be stressful, and it is common to feel some anxiety during these times. Anxiety can be harmful, however, when it results in obsessive thoughts, excessive worrying, or uncontrollable fears about everyday events. This can cause great distress and make it difficult to function.

Women of all backgrounds and ages can suffer from anxiety disorders in the “perinatal” period, the time during pregnancy and after the birth of a child. So can women who experience fertility problems or pregnancy loss, and fathers and adoptive parents too. Anxiety can occur by itself or with other conditions such as depression.

**If you are suffering, it is important to get help, for your own sake as well as your child’s.**

## ILLNESSES AND SYMPTOMS

Some of the anxiety disorders that may emerge or worsen during this time in a woman’s life are briefly described below along with possible symptoms.

### Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

- Worrying excessively about everyday things, including the health and safety of one’s children or an unborn child, even when the true risk of harm is low.
- Difficulties with sleep and concentration.
- Becoming easily fatigued.
- Irritability, restlessness, and muscle tension.

### Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

- Experiencing disturbing images, thoughts, or impulses over and over (obsessions).
- Around the time of childbirth, obsessions usually focus on harm coming to the baby, either accidentally or on purpose.
- Obsessions are very frightening and unusual to the parent, who tries desperately to avoid acting on them. In more than 30 years of clinical experience, we have *never* seen patients with OCD act on obsessions of doing harm to others.
- Often, the parent performs certain behaviors over and over to try to ease these thoughts and fears.
- Parents may fear being left alone with their baby, even to the point of avoiding the child completely, or they may be extremely overprotective of the baby.



### Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Feeling intense fear or hopelessness in response to a traumatic experience. What is traumatic for one mother may not be traumatic for another.
- Can arise after trauma experienced during or following childbirth.
- Childbirth, pelvic exams, or breastfeeding may trigger memories of past trauma (such as rape or sexual abuse).

*Symptoms may include:*

- Intense anxiety, fear, flashbacks, nightmares, feeling emotionally numb or distant.
- Avoiding things associated with the trauma to prevent “re-living” the event.
- Feeling extremely “on edge”: being irritable, having difficulty with sleep, startling easily.

### Panic Disorder

- Experiencing sudden, recurrent, and unpredictable panic attacks. These may include shortness of breath, racing heart, dizziness, chest tightness, chills, hot flashes, and fearing going crazy/losing control.
- These attacks are often associated with a variety of fears, for example: closed spaces, open spaces (like malls), crowds, or public transportation.
- A woman may experience panic attacks when attempting to leave the house with her baby, leading her to avoid activities outside the home.

### Are anxiety disorders treatable?

Yes. A variety of treatment options have been well-tested and found to be safe for moms and babies. In fact, *not* treating anxiety can be harmful to both mothers and their babies. Two of the most effective treatments for anxiety are medication and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, a form of talk therapy. Talk to your doctor about your options.

### What might put someone at risk for an anxiety disorder around childbirth?

- Personal or family history of an anxiety or mood disorder (depression, for example).
- High stress levels related to the new baby, marriage problems, injury or illness, loss of a loved one, or changes in finances, a job, or living arrangements.
- Difficult personal life experiences such as miscarriage or death of a child, a high-risk pregnancy, a traumatic childbirth experience, or a history of abuse (especially sexual abuse).
- Being sensitive to hormone changes.
- Lack of support.

### Getting help for yourself

- Tell your partner or a trusted family member or friend how you are feeling.
- Ask your doctor for a referral to a healthcare provider who is trained in perinatal mood and anxiety issues.
- Learn as much as you can – see the “Resources” section.
- Ask for help caring for the baby.
- Take care of yourself. Eating well, exercising, and getting good sleep can help reduce your symptoms.

### Getting help for a loved one

- Listen and do not dismiss her feelings.
- Be patient, supportive, and non-judgmental.
- Encourage her to get help.
- Offer to help with childcare or housework.
- Educate yourself about these conditions.