



A third of all women suffer misery and anxiety during their baby's first year – it's a secret that mothers dare not share

beyond the blues...

You've got a perfect baby – just what you've been dreaming of for nine months – but something's missing. Where is the elation you anticipated? All you feel is despair, fear... and shame. Shame that you can't cope, shame that you feel so miserable, shame that you can't live up to everybody's expectations.

Feeling sad and alone, you furtively look up baby manuals to find out what's happening to you. First you read about the baby blues. This starts between day three and five when your milk comes in (they called it "milk fever" in Victorian times) and symptoms include weeping and mood swings – a sort of hypersensitivity. It's incredibly common – up to 80 per cent of mothers get it – and completely disappears by about day 10.

But here you are, maybe a month or two into motherhood, and you still feel lousy so you decide it's not the baby blues. Instead you look up post-natal depression. This often develops out of the baby blues and the symptoms are difficulty sleeping, inability to eat, weight loss, persistent negativity, loss of confidence, poor concentration and memory, guilt and panic attacks. It affects one in 10, who often need counselling or drug treatment through their GP. If not treated it can last over a year.

But that's not you either. Yes, you're miserable, but you don't feel you need drugs. There is, however, a third form of misery that you probably

won't find in any reference book. It also develops out of the baby blues, but is far more common, though less severe, than clinical post-natal depression. The silent victims (possibly, about 30 per cent of new mothers – that's over 200,000 a year in the UK) continue to suffer alone from what could be termed DOOM – Despair at the Onset Of Motherhood.

"Figures for post-natal depression relate to those who come forward for treatment. The real number who feel down is much greater, but they don't see themselves as having PND," says Sue Botes, of the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association.

The symptoms of DOOM include inadequacy, low self-esteem, lethargy, weeping, lack of enjoyment in life and the baby, anxiety, over- or under-eating, finding small tasks impossible, loss of libido, obsession with baby's health, avoidance of other mothers, and hiding symptoms. This remains hidden because as a new mother you are meant to be happy, not

sad. Feeling down after the birth of a baby is a big taboo.

Identity crisis

Geoff Searle, spokesman for the Royal College of Psychiatrists, identifies two main reasons for feeling down after the birth of a baby: chemical (hormone changes, especially the precipitous drop in progesterone, after birth) and social (the massive life change) – with exhaustion exacerbating both.

With DOOM, social causes are crucial. Becoming a mother means a seismic shift in your identity. You celebrate the arrival of a new life, but mourn the passing of an old one – yours. You've moved up a generation. Your body is different and your life has altered immeasurably.

New mum, Isabel, says: "I felt that everyone saw me as just another woman with unbrushed hair and a bawling baby holding up the queue in Tesco's. I wanted to scream, 'This isn't me!'"

"I wanted to punch the career woman in designer clothes who looked right through me as she filled her basket with focaccia and I loaded my trolley with breast pads and formula milk.

"How dare she! I was just as good as her – I used to be part of her world. I felt so angry, so excluded. So worthless."

This major identity shift can ►

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bring problems with your partner. It's easy to feel irritation when he snores his way through the night feed, resentment when he escapes to the self-defining world of work, and despair when, the minute he's home, he coos over the baby and leaves you in a pool of tears and baby sick.

"I would veer from venting all my resentment at Paul," says Miranda, "to denying that anything was wrong. He once said: 'If you can't cope, we'll get a nanny.' I was devastated. It was as if he felt that I was so useless I couldn't even be a proper mother."

Looking after a baby is hard work. It exhausts you beyond endurance. "For a long time after Ella was born I felt I'd made a huge mistake," says Teresa. "I remember hiding at the end of the garden because I couldn't bear her crying. Her cries rang continually in my head. I felt as though she was a monster of my own making who was pursuing me. I wanted to escape. Looking back, I should have talked to someone. I don't think I needed to see a doctor, but admitting my feelings would have helped."

Then there's the chaos a baby brings: the house in turmoil, no task finished plus anxiety over the practicalities of baby care. And, of course, you feel that everyone is doing a much better job of this mother business than you.

Laura hated other new mothers for coping – for having a cooing baby, a clean, tidy house, and immaculate clothes. But underneath these women's competent exteriors, many of them would have been feeling just like her.

However Laura, stuck in her DOOM, hid herself away from other mothers: "I felt lonely and isolated – all of my old child-free friends were out leading very different lives, but I

couldn't relate to new mums either. I felt they were so in control. I locked myself in the house and cried."

For others, DOOM descends as a cloud of lethargy. "Everything was an effort," says Clare. "I took no delight in my baby, Tom. It was a combination of boredom, exhaustion and resentment that brought me down."

Of course, the outside world doesn't recognise that, for many, motherhood – first, second or even third time around – can be like this. That's why thousands suffer in silence. They feel the emotions they are experiencing are unacceptable. After all, the ideal mother is utterly serene, utterly happy, utterly selfless, isn't she? No!

Turning things around

The most important thing to remember is that you're allowed to have these feelings. It's normal, it's OK, you're entitled to feel like this and you're not a bad mother. So:

- * Don't set yourself too high expectations. Carla says: "I hadn't failed at anything – exams, career, men. And here I was, completely useless." But remember there's no such thing as a perfect mother and you are as good as the rest so try not to compare yourself to others. Tell yourself that even if another mother is wearing immaculate make-up, she probably hasn't had a shower and is in yesterday's knickers.
 - * Don't berate yourself for not bonding instantly – your baby is a stranger you must get to know and many find bonding tough. One mum admits: "Sometimes I look at him and wonder: 'Do I love you, did I want you?'" Relax and give love time to grow.
 - * Don't take the Pill – it can make you feel worse.
 - * Do try alternative remedies – St John's wort or kava kava (from health shops).
- Where to find support:**
- * Association for Post-natal Illness (☎ 020 7386 0868); Mon and Fri 10am-2pm, Tues-Thurs 10am-5pm; out of hours leave your details and you'll be called next day.
 - * Cry-Sis (☎ 020 7404 5011) – for parents of crying babies; 8am-11pm.
 - * Meet-A-Mum Association (☎ 020 8771 5595) – for contacts with local groups; helpline ☎ 020 8768 0123 (Mon-Fri, 7-10pm). ■

Get better **FAST!**

DOOM often resolves by a year after childbirth, but a year is a long time to feel lousy and there are ways to help yourself:

* talk...

The key to beating DOOM is:

- * Don't bottle up your feelings.
- * Cry when you want to.
- * Be open with your partner.
- * Confide in a friend.
- * Join post-natal groups.
- * Attend your baby clinic to establish a relationship with your health visitor and other mothers.
- * Contact a support organisation. As Jan Cummins of the Association for Post-natal Illness says: "Other mothers know what hell it can be and are proof that you will feel better."

* rest...

Tiredness makes everything worse, so:

- * Sleep as much as you can and limit visitors unless they've come to help.
- * Jan Cummins advises arranging support in advance – ask a friend or relative to stay after the birth so they can take over cooking, cleaning, etc.
- * Look out for crisis points (eg your partner going away) and plan ahead (ask a friend to stay and help out).
- * If you're exhausted but breastfeeding, express milk so your partner can do a night feed. Or give an occasional bottle (a rested mother is better than joyless breastfeeding).

* ...and play

Get out and about and keep active.

- * Find a babysitter to give you some time with your partner.
- * Go out while your partner holds baby.
- * Go out with your baby during the day so the walls don't seem to be closing in on you.
- * Go out as a family in the evening or at weekends.
- * Exercise to improve mood and help insomnia.
- * If you can afford it, get a cleaner – cleaning the loo won't boost your self-esteem. Doing something for yourself will.

