

# Beyond the Blues: Partners

The following is Chapter 4 of Beyond the Blues, by Shoshana S. Bennett, PhD, and Pec Indman, EdD, MFT. The authors have generously given permission to have this chapter posted here. To get a copy of their book, visit the PSI Bookstore.

## Beyond the Blues, Chapter 4, Partners

This chapter is designed to provide support to you, the partner, regardless of your gender or marital status. To avoid confusion, we sometimes refer to the new mother as “wife.” The sooner you become involved in the recovery process, and the greater your involvement, the more you both will benefit— together and separately. The more you understand what she is experiencing, the better supported she will feel. That will, in turn, expedite her recovery.

### Things to Keep in Mind

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- You didn’t cause her illness and you can’t take it away. Postpartum depression and anxiety is a biochemical disorder. It is no one’s fault. When her brain chemistry returns to normal, she will feel like herself again. It is your job to support her as this happens.
- She doesn’t expect you to “fix it.” Many partners feel frustrated because they feel inadequate or unable to fix the problem. She doesn’t need you to try to take the problem away. This isn’t like a leaky faucet that can be repaired with a new washer. Don’t suggest quick-fix solutions. This isn’t that kind of problem. She just needs you to listen.

- Get the support you need so you can be there for her. We frequently see the phenomenon of the partner becoming depressed during or after his wife's depression. You can avoid this by taking care of yourself and getting your own support from friends, family, or professionals. You should make sure to get breaks from taking care of your family. Regular exercise or other stress-reducing activity is important so you can remain the solid support for your wife. Provide a stand-in support person for her while you're gone.
- Don't take it personally. Irritability is common with postpartum depression/anxiety. Don't allow yourself to become a verbal punching bag. It's not good for anyone concerned. She feels guilty after saying hurtful things to you. If you feel you didn't deserve to be snapped at, explain that to her calmly.
- Just being there with and for her is doing a great deal. Being present and letting her know you support her is often all she'll need. Ask her what words she needs to hear for reassurance, and say them to her often.
- Lower your expectations. Even a non-depressed postpartum woman cannot realistically be expected to cook dinner and clean house. She may be guilt-tripping herself about not measuring up to her own expectations and worrying that you will also be disappointed. Remind her that parenting your child and taking care of your home is also your job, not just hers. Your relationship and family will emerge from this crisis stronger than ever.
- Let her sleep at night. She needs five hours of uninterrupted sleep per night to complete a full sleep cycle and restore her biorhythms. If you want your wife back quicker, be on duty for half the night without disturbing her. Many dads and partners have expressed how much closer they are to their children because of nighttime caretaking. If you can't be up with the baby during the

night, hire someone who can take your place. A temporary baby nurse will be worth her weight in gold.

## What to Say, What Not to Say

### Say:

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- We will get through this.
- I'm here for you.
- If there is something I can do to help you, please tell me. For example, care for the baby, run her a warm bath, put on soothing music.
- I'm sorry you're suffering. That must feel awful.
- I love you very much.
- The baby loves you very much.
- This is temporary
- You'll get yourself back. As she recovers, point out specifics about how you see her old self returning; such as, smiling again, more patience, or going out with her friends.
- You're doing such a good job. Give specific examples.
- You're a great mom. Give specific examples, such as "I love how you smile at the baby."
- This isn't your fault. If I were ill, you wouldn't blame me.

### Do Not Say:

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- Think about everything you have to feel happy about. She already knows everything she has to feel happy about. One of the reasons she feels so guilty

is that she is depressed despite these things.

- Just relax. This suggestion usually produces the opposite effect! She is already frustrated at not being able to relax despite all the coping mechanisms that have worked in the past. Anxiety produces hormones that can cause physiological reactions, such as an increased heart rate, shakiness, visual changes, shortness of breath, and muscle tension. This is not something she can just will away.
- Snap out of it. If she could, she would have already. She wouldn't wish this on anyone. A person cannot snap out of an illness.
- Just think positively. It would be lovely if recovery were that simple! The nature of this illness prevents positive thinking. Depression feels like wearing foggy, dark, distorted lenses which filter out positive input from the environment. Only negative, guilt ridden interpretations of the world are perceived. This illness is keeping her from experiencing the lighter, humorous, and joyful aspects of life.

## From a Dad Who's Been There

*You've just come home from a long day at work, hoping to find a happy home — and what you find makes you want to get back into the car and leave. Your wife is in tears, the baby is crying. The house is a mess, and forget about dinner. By now you know better than to ask how her day was. Her response is always the same. "I hate this 'mother' stuff. I don't want to be anyone's mother. I want my old life back. I want to be happy again." You shrug, go to hold the baby, and wonder why your wife is feeling this way, why she's not as happy as you are about the baby, and when she will snap out of it.*

*You're not alone. I lived with this scene every day for two years. Every ounce of my patience was tested, but I kept hoping that things would be "normal"*

*again. I focused on my baby daughter, the one in the midst of this mess, and kept telling myself I'd be there for her.*

*Slowly, slowly, my wife recovered from the illness. Today, we have that happy home we both always wanted. Be patient and tolerant. Remember, it will get better.*