

# CO-OP COMMUNITY NEWS

From the Parent Advisory Council  
of the North Seattle Community College  
Cooperative Preschool Program



October 2004

## “THIS ISN'T HOW IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE!”

### Postpartum Mood Disorders, The “Baby Blues,” & “Normal” Adjustment

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Before I became a therapist, I had heard very little about postpartum mood disorders. My awareness of the issue was limited to a brief mention in the childbirth-education class I took during my first pregnancy (“...if you’re depressed for more than two weeks, get professional help...”) and oblique references in newspaper accounts of tragedies involving new moms (“...a neighbor noted that she had seemed depressed since the birth of the baby...”). I had the impression that postpartum mood disorders were infrequent and remote, something we should all be aware of but not particularly worried about, like TB—something that does occur, but not to ourselves or anyone we might know.

But postpartum mood disorders are far more common than is generally thought. Ten to twenty percent

of new mothers experience some variety of postpartum mood disorders. Moreover, if not treated by therapy or medication, these mood disorders are likely to persist beyond what we normally think of as the “postpartum” period and to recur in subsequent pregnancies.

“Ten to twenty percent of new mothers experience some variety of postpartum mood disorders.”

### The Many Faces of Postpartum Mood Disorders

Although when we hear “postpartum mood disorders,” we think of depression, there are other types, including:

**Postpartum Depression** (symptoms include: depressed mood, hopelessness, lack of interest in normal activities, feelings of inadequacy, thoughts of harming self or the baby, sleep problems, eating problems) occurs in 10-26% of new mothers. If the depression goes

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## 2004-2005 Calendar

### October

11 PAC Meeting

### November

8 PAC Meeting

11 Veterans Day (no school)

25-26 Thanksgiving (no school)

### December

13 PAC Meeting

20-31 Winter Break (no school)

### January

12 PAC Meeting

17 MLKing Jr. Day (no school)

### February

14 PAC Meeting

21 Presidents Day (no school)

22-25 Mid-Winter Break (no school)

### March

14 PAC Meeting

TBD Coop In-house Registration

TBD Coop Open Registration

### April

11-15 Spring Break (no school)

18 PAC Meeting

### May

9 PAC Meeting

30 Memorial Day (no school)

### June

13 Last day of classes for Seattle  
Public School students

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## POSTPARTUM

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untreated, 40% of these mothers are still depressed one year after delivery. Recurrence rate in subsequent pregnancies is 70%.

**Postpartum Anxiety Disorder** includes physical symptoms (muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, hyperventilating, diarrhea, insomnia) as well as mental (inability to concentrate, fear of being alone, fears for the baby's health, agoraphobia, feeling trapped), and can coexist with depression.

**Postpartum Panic Disorder** (an acute form of anxiety characterized by anxiety symptoms [see above] plus more acute symptoms such as a fear of going crazy, acute shortness of breath, fears of dying,) occurs in 10% of new mothers.

**Postpartum Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder** (symptoms include intrusive obsessive thoughts such as fears, feelings of inadequacy, and guilt, or compulsive behaviors such as constantly checking on the baby, checking stoves and light switches, obsessive cleaning): Of the women who develop this disorder sometime during their life, 25% had their *first* episode of OCD during pregnancy or the postpartum. If they had this disorder before their pregnancy, nearly 100% relapse during the postpartum.

**Postpartum Bipolar Disorder** involves cycles of depression alternating with episodes of anxiety; 50% of women who develop this disorder had their first episode in the postpartum.

**Postpartum Psychosis** (the most severe of the mood disorders) occurs only in 0.1 – 0.2% of mothers (1 or 2 out of every 1000).

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder** Birth of a child can trigger memories of past trauma, resulting in symptoms such as intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, hypervigilance about the baby, loss of interests, etc.

In addition, there is the non-clinical, milder form of postpartum depression commonly known as the **postpartum blues** or the “**baby blues**,” which are experienced by 50 – 80% of women. So, even if we take the conservative (low end) numbers, 75% of mothers are affected by postpartum mood problems of one sort or another. As one researcher (Thurtle) has pointed out, if 75% of women who give birth are affected, maybe we should regard depression and other mood problems as a *normal* aspect of early motherhood rather than some rare event.

## Why the Silence?

With a prevalence rate this high, why are postpartum mood disorders not given more attention in childbirth education classes? Why is there so little public awareness of this problem affecting the lives of such a high percentage of women and children? One reason is the stigma attached to mental health issues; we'll readily talk about cancer, or hip surgeries, even colonoscopies, but not mood disorders. Another reason is the cultural idealization and romanticizing of motherhood; we celebrate loudly and publicly the joys of motherhood, but maintain a conspiracy of silence about the difficulties, and, yes, the losses — perhaps because we fear that if we acknowledge the stresses of becoming a parent, we might be seen as denying the joys. And the “mommy myth” — the myth that we can do it all, we WILL do it all, and happily! — makes it taboo to admit we're having trouble coping.

According to a conference I attended on this subject, even health care providers are slow to recognize postpartum mental health disorders: “This continues to be the most missed and minimized of psychiatric disorders” (Gentry, 1999).

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“People and Their Pets”  
by Arya Whitehorn,  
Age 4



## Kindergarten Readiness

**Seattle Public Schools:** [www.seattleschools.org](http://www.seattleschools.org) (click on “Enrollment Services”). Pre-Registration for Fall 2005 runs Nov. 1 — Dec. 22, 2004. Open houses are early- to mid-January.

**Seattle Private Schools:** see list of open houses at the ParentMap web site: [www.parentmap.com/soh.htm](http://www.parentmap.com/soh.htm)

**For More Information:** Visit the web sites above and check out your co-op's Kindergarten Readiness folder, prepared and updated each year by PAC. Look for them in October, via your PAC Rep.

## Who is at Risk?

The following factors put a woman at risk for postpartum mood disorders:

- History of emotional problems, depression, or anxiety
- Previous postpartum mood problems
- Difficult delivery or a high-needs baby
- Isolation or inadequate social support, including earlier-than-expected discharge from hospital or departure of visiting relatives
- Grief over loss of career
- Recent major stress (death in family, divorce, moving, losses, illness)
- Unsupportive partner or no partner
- Low income
- Difficulty asking for help
- Low self-esteem
- Physical illnesses or medical conditions, sleep deprivation

## “Normal” Postpartum Adjustment is Difficult, Too

The first months after the birth of a baby (or after adoption—though usually to a lesser extent because of the lack of hormonal changes in the mother) are a stressful time for the mother and, if she has a partner, the couple. While some women sail through the period of adjustment, adapting relatively easily to the changes and stresses of life with a new baby, for most the adjustment is not easy.

Life with a new baby can feel like an emotional roller-coaster, with our mood shifting between extremes over the course of the day. We can be filled with joy one moment, weepy the next. Emotions may be more intense than usual, and may seem more

“primitive”—childish, immature, unreasonable. Frustration, irritation, and anger can arise at the drop of a hat—at one’s spouse, at siblings, even at the baby—often followed by guilt. Worries, fears, crying, feeling overwhelmed, feeling out of control, lack of confidence, sadness, even panic are common. We may feel extremely vulnerable and/or helpless, out of touch with our own competence and skills. Changes in the family system—the couple becoming a threesome, the threesome becoming a foursome, etc.—involve losses and new roles that require adjustment, creating tension. Becoming a mother adds wonderful new dimensions to who we are, but it also brings the loss of some aspects of our former identity, and coming to terms with that shift in “who I am” creates strain. Buffeted by all these feelings, it’s not uncommon for women to feel a little crazy.

For many women, some of these feelings last much longer than two weeks. I have heard mothers of infants and toddlers talk about feeling overwhelmed, feeling isolated or devalued, feeling resentful of their partner’s relative freedom, feeling nostalgic for their previous relationship with their partner or the first child, having regrets about quitting a career that they had built over the

years, wondering whether they were suited to be mothers since they were not enjoying the first year as much as they thought they should . . . and feeling guilty for having these negative feelings! These women were very distressed. And yet they would not have been diagnosed with a mood disorder.

## A Sliding Scale

The emotional and mood problems experienced by moms after a baby’s birth fall on a continuum, really, with “normal” adjustment at one end, “postpartum mood disorders” at the other, and “baby blues” somewhere in the middle.

This continuum suggests another reason why we may not recognize a postpartum mood disorder in ourselves or in people we know. Normal adjustment problems can “slide into” what is a diagnosable clinical mood disorder without anyone really noticing; it can be a gradual thing, becoming accustomed to feeling bad. And our family and friends can get used to our mood swings, our exhaustion, our despair, and “tune it out.”

## Postpartum Mood Disorders: What Are the Signs?

The signs of a possible postpartum mood disorder include:

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## NSCC Co-op Preschool Fall 2004 Openings\*

	Co-op	Openings	Contact	Phone
<b>Pre-3s</b>	Ingraham	8	Anita Wooster	789.9186
	Meadowbrook	4	Monica Mace	522.0274
	Northgate PM	7	Jill Petro	706.1113
<b>3-5s</b>	Broadview	5	Erika Larimer	425.774.6571
	Latona	1	Kari Olson	525.5126
	Wallingford AM	4	Lisa Drake	632.9817
<b>Web Link</b>	To view current listings and for descriptions of each co-op, please go to <a href="http://northonline.sccd.ctc.edu/parented">northonline.sccd.ctc.edu/parented</a> *current as of 10-7-04			

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- Difficulty sleeping (never feeling rested, even when getting enough sleep, unable to sleep even when the baby is sleeping, awakening from nightmares, etc.)
- Feeling wretched all the time; no interest or pleasure in things
- Difficulty functioning on a day-to-day level (not accomplishing things, but doing routine daily activities, basic self-care)
- Thoughts about suicide or recurring thoughts about harming the baby

- Fears/phobias; panic attacks; “scary thoughts” about the baby
- Inability to bond with the baby
- Feelings of inadequacy about caring for the baby
- Any psychotic symptoms: hallucinations
- Feeling constantly overwhelmed

When any of the above are present, it’s time to seek out professional help. But even if none of the above signs of a clinical mood disorder are present, when the “baby blues” or any of the feelings described

above as typical of “normal” adjustment persist beyond the first few weeks, it’s time to take steps to improve things, rather than assume “this is just the way it is/has to be.”

NOTE: This article will be continued in the November issue. Concluding topics will include:

- Reasons to Take Action
- What Can We Do? — Prevention and Interaction
- Resources and References

## Let’s Vote!



**November 2nd is Election Day, and it’s NOT too late to register!** Do so in person, now through October 18, at the following location:

The King County Elections Office  
 King County Administrative Building  
 500 4th Ave. Rm. 553  
 Open M-F 8:30am-4:30pm  
 Sat. through Oct. 16 (9am-5pm)  
 206.296.VOTE  
 www.metrokc.gov/elections

**Don’t know your “polling place”?** Visit [www.metrokc.gov/elections](http://www.metrokc.gov/elections) and plug in your name and birthday or address—up pops the location. Browse the online voter’s guide, while you’re at it. But don’t leave it to the last minute; this site gets overloaded before an election!



“Farmer Hannah and Her Bigger Sister, Josephine”  
 by Ava Fleisher  
 Age 4

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October is . . .



## Fire Prevention Month

Check those smoke detector batteries, review your family emergency plans, and have some fun at the Seattle Public Library Firefighter Story Times (visit [www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org) for locations, dates & times).