



Nan Lee

BECOMING A PARENT

Is There Any Way to Emotionally



By Lindsey Hunter Lopez



THE GIST

- Manage your expectations; let go of the idealized image of parenthood and/or birth.
- Connect with your partner (if you have one) during pregnancy and prepare for a potentially tough first year.
- Overestimate recovery time. It may not be easy to “snap back” from birth in mere weeks; it can actually take up to a year to fully recover.
- Sleep is important! Try to plan a way to get a decent amount of rest, enlisting help from family and friends if needed.
- Social support can help normalize emotions; connect with other new parents through existing relationships, internet groups, classes or playgroups.
- Take time to see friends and pursue passions or hobbies to help retain a sense of self.

When to Worry

Here are some signs you may need additional support or medical care.



While the adage that “nothing can prepare you for parenthood” is mostly true, there are *some* things you can do to get into the right headspace before you have kids. Preparing mentally and emotionally during pregnancy can reduce the risk of mood disorders (like postpartum anxiety and depression) and ease the transition to parenthood. There’s a shift in identity that comes with becoming a parent and letting go of Instagram-glossy notions of the perfect pregnancy or birth can help immensely with this monumental life change.

I spoke with two professors who research first-time parenting, as well as three clinical psychologists, an ob-gyn, and a marriage and family therapist. This cadre of perinatal mental health experts explained how parents can best navigate their new reality. I only wish I had done this research before having my own children!



WHAT TO DO

Collapse all



Manage expectations.



It's helpful to understand that the reality of early parenthood isn't as rosy as one might think. Dr. Darby Saxbe, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at the University of Southern California, recommended lowering both your standards and your expectations. The reality is that a lot of expectant parents feel ambivalent or overwhelmed. Dr. Saxbe recommended reframing early parenthood as "a temporary period that you're expecting as opposed to a crisis that's going to destroy everything that you value." If that sounds a little scary, it should. "A baby changes everything and your life will not be the same after the baby arrives," said Dr. Diana Morelen, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at East Tennessee State University who specializes in perinatal mental health. You may lose your ability to get restful sleep. You won't be able to do all the things you think you should. Dr. Lindsay Trent, Ph.D., a San Francisco-based psychologist and the co-founder of the therapy app [Basis](#), recommended asking yourself what changes you expect in your life and relationships. "Be kind to yourself," added Dr. Morelen. "Lower the bar." Then maybe lower it again.

Connect with your partner.

Focus on the couple relationship (if applicable) and shore that up before the often-rocky first year of parenting hits. Dr. Saxbe said that a couple's relationship quality tends to decline around the transition to parenthood, but you don't have to follow that trend. "The year following childbirth is one of the most stressful times in marital relationships; couples who haven't adequately prepared for the hardships of parenting in terms of logistics, child-rearing philosophies and financial issues are more likely to experience conflict and marital stress," said Dr. Noosha Niv, Ph.D., a psychologist and the founder of the Mind Matters Institute, in Glendale, Calif. How can you prepare your relationship? Reflect on the strengths and challenges within your union, Dr. Morelen suggested. (And check out our [guide for how partners can best support pregnant women](#).) A new baby will stress even the healthiest of relationships, so it's important to build strong communication strategies with your partner before the baby arrives.

Establish parenting values.

Dr. Niv said she helps expecting couples to establish where their parenting values align and, more importantly, where they *don't* align. "It's important to identify and reconcile values

surrounding parenting before the baby is born; reaching resolution on parenting topics is far more difficult when you're stressed and sleep-deprived," she said. If you're parenting with a partner, it's a good idea to discuss childrearing philosophies before the baby arrives. When you're visualizing and preparing your parenting plans, add your baby to the picture. "Think about what your baby will be like," said Dr. Morelen. "Think about traditions you'd like to share, lessons you'd like to teach, songs you'd like to sing, etc."

Face fears.



It's natural to feel fearful or anxious about certain aspects of parenthood. "Give yourself permission to feel a range of emotions," said Dr. Morelen. "Talk to trusted loved ones about your feelings — chances are you'll learn that you're not alone." But if fear or stress is persistent, Dr. Trent recommended taking a hard look at the scenario that scares you. "Set aside a block of time solely devoted to nailing down what, specifically, about the situation or possible outcome is evoking fear or stress," she said. Doing so allows you to realistically appraise the actual concern (instead of the more nebulous fear) and also allows for problem-solving. If this strategy doesn't provide enough relief, consider seeking professional help to ease anxiety.

Overestimate recovery time.



It's helpful to overestimate how much recovery and support time you'll need. Postpartum medical care generally ends after the six-week postpartum checkup, and hormones have usually evened out by that point. But studies have shown that it can take [six months](#) to a year to fully recover (physically and mentally) from childbirth. According to a [study](#) by researchers at the University of Michigan's School of Nursing, it can take over eight months for pelvic floor recovery alone. Research by Dr. Julie Wray, Ph.D., of the [University of Salford](#) in England found that mothers need up to a year to recover. It's just not realistic to expect to "bounce back" two weeks after birth. Unfortunately, it also may not be realistic to avoid going back to work.

To aid in recovery, Dr. Jephtha Tausig, Ph.D., a psychologist in New York City, recommended that new mothers outsource some tasks. "If you can have others help with errands and chores (laundry, cleaning, making meals, etc.) that will make a huge difference," she said. Don't try to do it all, because that just might not be possible. Be gentle with yourself. "Being tired and slightly overwhelmed is all completely normal — you can't plan to accomplish much if you are the primary caregiver at home with baby," noted Dr. Nataki Douglas, M.D., Ph.D., a Newark, N.J.-based ob-gyn and an associate professor and director of translational research for the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Women's Health at Rutgers-New Jersey Medical School.

Try to sleep.



No one feels good when they're not sleeping, and lack of sleep is actually [linked to mood disorder risk](#). When sleep rhythms get dysregulated, that leads to an increased [risk for bipolar disorder and depression](#), said Dr. Saxbe. Figure out [ways to protect sleep](#) because lack of sleep is a common problem following the birth of a new baby, said Los Angeles-based marriage and family therapist [Elyse Springer](#). "I don't think most parents are truly prepared for the utter devastation following days on end without a good chunk of sleep." As much as possible, plan ways to ensure that you get rest after the baby arrives. Enlist help from your partner, family, a paid specialist such as a night nurse or friends. "If you're able to take a break and rest, you'll be better able to take care of your baby in the long run," said Dr. Morelen.

Build social bonds – in person and online.



Talk to new parents about what to expect and understand that people have different reactions to new parenthood, said Dr. Saxbe. Hearing that some pregnancies and babies are different from other pregnancies and babies is helpful. Plus, social support is important and [linked](#) with decreased postpartum depression risk. "Women without good social support, regardless of socioeconomic status, are at risk," Dr. Douglas said. Online groups can be very helpful for normalizing feelings and experiences related to new motherhood.

Offline, there are plenty of real-world opportunities for building bonds. Prenatal exercise or parenting classes, breastfeeding classes and mommy-and-me yoga are just a few of the places where new parents can connect in person. "Parenting takes a village, and it's important to feel connected and supported as you make this transition," said Dr. Morelen. "I encourage expectant parents to reach out to other parents whom they trust to ask what those people found helpful (or not helpful) in their own preparation journeys."

WHEN TO WORRY

Once you've had your baby, it's important to be monitored for significant changes in mood for that first year of your child's life, said Springer, "because we don't know the precise impact of the combination of an individual's 'ghosts in the nursery': lack of sleep, pressures of work, finances and relationships and hormonal changes." Fluctuations are normal, to an extent. The "baby blues," for instance: [Up to 80 percent](#) of new mothers experience mood swings, sadness or anxiety soon after childbirth. But if you notice more serious symptoms, such as intrusive thoughts about hurting the baby or yourself, tell other people and seek support. You can discuss symptoms with your ob-gyn or go to a therapist for help. "It is important to know that anyone, regardless of

culture, age or history, is at greater risk for mental health challenges during the perinatal period,” said Dr. Morelen. This risk increases if you have a personal or family history of mental health problems; have experienced significant trauma; have a history of drug or alcohol problems; live in poverty; have major financial stressors; or if you don’t have a good social support system.

Even with adequate support, postpartum depression or other mood disorders can strike. “It’s important that we’re talking and sharing about it so that women realize that PPD is nothing to be ashamed of,” Dr. Douglas said.

Lindsey Hunter Lopez is a freelance writer and mother of two.



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SOURCES

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