

POST PARTUM PAMPERING

By Ann Dunnewold, Ph.D and Diane Sanford Ph.D

You may have become accustomed to taking care of yourself physically while you were pregnant. Many women try to eat right, exercise, and get sufficient rest while they're pregnant, spurred on by this attention to their body, and the sense that more than their own health and well-being is on the line.

Once the baby has arrived, though no one pays much attention to the new mom's body anymore. Everyone's attention-including yours-shifts to the baby, and it's the baby who gets weighed, measured, and cared for at each doctor's visit now, not you. With the focus no longer on your behavior, it seems much less important. And it would be selfish, at this point, when your baby needs every minute of your attention, right?

These common misconceptions lay the foundation for many a new mother lapsing into-or even trying to achieve-complete neglect of her own needs in favor of those of the baby. But before you do this, stop and think again.

Is Your Pitcher Empty or Full? To be a good mother, first you must be good to yourself, both physically and emotionally. This does not mean, of course, that it's okay to neglect your baby's essential needs for food, warmth, cleanliness, or comfort. But babies are very effective when it comes to making sure their needs are known.

Make a Survival Plan. Every new mother needs to establish the habit of taking care of herself during the hectic days, weeks, and months following the birth of her baby. The groundwork for your survival plan should include the following elements. You need to:

Nurture yourself physically. It's absolutely essential to your physical and mental health that you take care of your physical needs. You need to get adequate sleep and rest. You need to eat properly; vitamin supplements are important, but they're not a cure for loading up on junk food.

Develop a support system. Getting together with other parents who share similar concerns and needs, has been shown to prevent postpartum depression. Just seeing other moms struggling with the same problems you're grappling with can be validating.

Express and accept negative feelings, while also attending to positive feelings. It takes a great deal of emotional energy to avoid thinking about the hard part of this life change. The harder you work to push those scary or depressing feelings away, the less time and energy you have to live your life. If you can allow yourself to voice negative feelings somewhere safe, you may find yourself free to experience the positive aspects of having a new baby as well.

Take breaks. How can you expect to fill up the pitcher again if you never get a few minutes off duty? Breaks are the law in the paid working world. They should be your

daily life as well. You need a few minutes to read the paper, sip some tea, put your feet up and just dream. You also need an hour or two away to do something fun. The new mother needs breaks alone, and the couple needs breaks from life as “just parents.”

Keep your expectations realistic. If you had grand ideas about reading the complete works of Shakespeare or wallpapering all the bedrooms while you were home on maternity leave, recognize these notions for what they are: completely unrealistic fantasies. If you get to shower every day you’ll be doing well one of these tasks, you’re batting 500.

Structure your day. The night before, while you’re still thinking clearly, sit down and plan out your agenda for the next day. It helps to have at least one outing to look forward to each day—even if it’s just a walk around the block. If you feel anxious about going out, schedule a telephone call to a friend. Try to plan at least one event involving adult contact, beyond your partner’s return in the evening.

Diane Sanford, Ph. D, specializes in the treatment of mental health issues related to reproductive life events including pregnancy and postpartum adjustment, infertility, pregnancy loss, PMS, and menopause. This information is taken from her book with coauthor, Ann Dunnewold, ‘Postpartum Survival Guide.’ New Harbinger Publications.