

SLEEP AND PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH

My name is Dr. Jillian Satin and I'm a registered clinical psychologist who focuses on mental health in pregnancy and the postpartum period. I have two kids under 6 and I work with exhausted parents every day. I definitely get it!

I'm going to discuss the impact of sleep deprivation on parents, followed by my tips for coping better when you're an exhausted parent, and then I'll share my best strategies to manage your own sleep difficulties. Every parent knows that sleep disruption is part of welcoming a new baby into the family. In fact, sleep difficulties often begin for mothers in the third trimester for a variety of reasons including physical discomfort. From the moment baby is born, parents are instantly immersed into a hazy 24-hour cycle of feeding, burping, and changing diapers that can seem never-ending. As the effects of sleep disruption set in, getting baby to sleep becomes the ultimate goal. There's the rocking. There's the shushing. There's the car-rides and the long walks. Parents find themselves doing whatever routine they think worked the night before. If you sang Old MacDonald in a certain key the night before and it worked, I know you're going to try that again. And then you will feel so very disappointed if it doesn't work the same way the following night. I remember it myself and I hear it from my clients- that lack of predictability and control can be so hard- especially when your own sleep hangs in the balance.

Parents can feel absolutely desperate to get their babies to sleep so that they themselves can get the sleep they so need. And for good reason. We all know from experience that poor sleep can cloud our thinking. I once put a carton of eggs in the microwave instead of the fridge. These alarming and sometimes hilarious mistakes happen to all of us when we're sleep-deprived. Research confirms that sleep affects memory, attention, and cognitive performance. It even affects the way we process emotional information. So, if you have found yourself weeping even just watching a sentimental commercial when you're tired, you are not alone- and it may be physiological. Poor sleep in pregnancy and in the postpartum period is associated with increased maternal postpartum depression and postpartum anxiety. Though studies most often focus on mothers, fathers may actually sleep less than mothers in the first month, as they will not have opportunities to nap during the day if they have returned to work (Bayer 2007). We need to be looking out for dads and taking their postpartum mental health seriously as well.

The relationship between sleep and depression is bi-directional, meaning that one influences the other. If you sleep poorly, you are more likely to develop depression. If you are depressed, you are more likely to develop sleep problems. In the postpartum period, both scenarios may be present. You may experience depressive symptoms as a result of baby's frequent night-waking over time. You may also experience difficulty sleeping as a symptom of depression, meaning you cannot sleep even when your baby does. Given that depression affects 10% of men and over 20% of women in the postpartum period, this is a common problem.

If you believe that you are experiencing sleep or mental health difficulties that are interfering with your functioning or with your ability to enjoy your baby, I highly recommend discussing treatment options with a health care provider or mental health practitioner. Help is available and treatment works.

Here is the first of my top five tips to cope better with sleep disruption after having a baby:

Top tip #1: Prioritize your sleep

The expression 'sleep when the baby sleeps' can be one of the most frustrating things a parent can hear. I will never forget seeing a t-shirt with the hilarious response 'do laundry when the baby does laundry'. It is so true- there is too much to do around the house and too little time so it's tempting to use nap times for chores. When there is so much else to do, it can be difficult to prioritize your own sleep, whether it be naps or nighttime sleep. It is true that you would be much faster emptying the dishwasher, folding laundry, or cooking without simultaneously tending to your baby, but sleep is just about the only thing that you cannot do while tending to your baby.

If your baby can be put down for naps at least once a day, use that time to do something you couldn't do when baby is awake. If you can't fall asleep, try lying down with your eyes closed even with zero expectation of sleeping. I'll talk about strategies to help you fall asleep in the next section.

If you are someone who likes every household chore to be completed in order to relax, try to remind yourself that this stage is temporary, whether you have a newborn or a toddler. You will be much more efficient at getting things done if you are well rested and you will likely feel more in control as well.

More coming soon...