

Yoga and PostPartum Depression: the Connection

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Are you a new mother? Are you struggling with what people often dismiss as the "baby blues", but it feels worse than that? It's quite normal to feel somewhat depressed or anxious after the birth of a new baby, especially your first. You are physically exhausted from childbirth, and from the lack of sleep that goes along with having an infant. Your hormones are all over the place, you may feel overwhelmed, stressed out or anxious about taking care of a newborn, and you may worry about the possibility of failing. Maybe you feel isolated, because you can't take the new baby out in public too much. These reasons alone could make anyone depressed. But did you know that there's a possible chemical reason for the way you feel?

Research has shown that the level of cortisol, our major "stress hormone", are generally elevated during pregnancy, to help us cope with the stress of pregnancy and childbirth. That level plummets after the baby is born. Some women have been shown to have extremely elevated levels of cortisol late in pregnancy, which leads to a much more drastic drop after the baby is born, and this drop in cortisol is definitely linked to depression.

The amazing thing is that yoga, and especially the deep breathing associated with yoga practice, can actually correct those hormonal imbalances, thereby improving your mood. Yoga poses serve to strengthen, tone, and relax your body while helping you to focus on that deep breathing which can be so healing.

Many women also feel unhappy with, or disconnected from, their bodies after the birth of a baby. You've gotten used to carrying that baby around for 9 months, and it can take some time to get used to the "new you" after birth. You may be in pain, especially if you had a C-section, so it's hard to move around much. You may be unhappy with the way your body looks, or beating yourself up for the "baby fat" that you may be struggling to shed. Yoga can help you get your body moving again in a gentle manner, using the breath, that vital energy, to help your body and mind and reconnected. Simply moving through some yoga postures can help you to feel better about your body again. And if you have a private yoga session, or a yoga therapy session, you will have the opportunity to discuss and release any feelings which may arise during your yoga practice.

The combination of gentle, thoughtful exercise (which helps strengthen the parts of your body which need it most after childbirth), relaxation and deep breathing exercises make yoga the perfect activity for the new mom. If you can get to a yoga class without the baby, that is ideal, for then you can really focus on yourself. But there are many "mom and baby" classes out there which allow you to bring your baby and bond with him/her

through yoga. To take it a step further, you may want to explore yoga therapy, which gives you a chance, on a 1-on-1 basis, to use gentle yoga and dialogue to help you connect with your feelings and release them, healing body and mind at the same time.

In case you cannot make it to a class or a yoga therapy session, here are some techniques which may help you:

3-part breathing: come to a comfortable seated position, or lie down on your back. Rest one hand on your belly, and the other over your heart. Breathe in slowly through your nose, feeling your belly rise, and then your chest rise, and then maybe you feel your collarbones lift slightly (these are the 3 parts to the breath). As you exhale deeply, let your mouth fall open, and feel the collarbones drop, then the chest drops, then the belly contracts. Try to make your inhaleds as long as your exhaleds; try inhaling for a slow count of 3, and then exhaling for an equally slow count of 3. Taking about 10 slow, deep breaths just like this can make you feel more relaxed and refreshed, can ease mild anxiety and depression, and can help you think more clearly.

Cobra: Cobra is a mild backbend, which strengthens the back (which often becomes weak during pregnancy due to the stretching of the abdominals), and is very energizing. Lie on your stomach with your hands by your sides and your forehead on the floor (or mat, if you have one). Bend your elbows and bring your hands to the floor below your shoulders. On an inhale, squeeze the shoulder blades together and gently peel your head and chest off the floor, reaching out through the crown of the head and keeping your gaze on the floor. There should be very little weight in the hands. You will feel your upper back working. If you are feeling strong, begin to put some weight into the hands, and press your upper body higher up off the floor, feeling the middle and lower back engage. You might stay here about 3 slow breaths, then relax down on your belly. Work up to 3 rounds of cobra to strengthen and tone your back, and stretch your abdominals.

Child's Pose: A good counter pose to cobra is child's pose, stretching out the back and elongating the spine. You may also feel some stretch through the hips, which can get stiff after childbirth. Come onto your hands and knees, and then begin to sit back over your heels, bringing your toes together and letting your knees fall slightly apart. Stretch the arms long out in front of you. If your knees hurt, you can try tucking a pillow in the crease at the back of your knees, and you can also try resting your chest on a pillow. Child's pose is very soothing and relaxing; you may enjoy breathing deeply and relaxing in this pose as long as you like.

Modified Plank: - A modified plank pose is often used in personal training or Pilates, and helps to strengthen and tone your whole core, especially your abdominals. It is important to re-strengthen the stomach muscles after childbirth, but to proceed slowly, especially if you have experienced a splitting of the muscles. Come onto your belly, and then set your elbows on the floor, clasping your hands. Tuck your toes under and lift your torso, so that just your toes, elbows and forearms are on the floor. Really tighten your abdominal muscles and breathe. If you find that your lower back is arching, or hurting you, start

with keeping your knees on the floor until your stomach muscles get stronger. Try 3-5 slow breaths in plank pose, and slowly work up to more.

Legs up the Wall: Finally, legs up the wall is a very relaxing pose with many benefits. Inverting your body relaxes your heart and assists with circulation. This inverted position can also help to reposition your uterus properly, and can alleviate mild insomnia. Put one hip up against a wall. Then swing your legs around and bring your back to the floor, so that your back is flat, your buttocks are pressing up against the wall, and your legs are against the wall up over your head. If your lower back is arching off the floor, you might try to tuck a pillow there. You can relax your arms by your sides, out in a “T” position, or over your head. This is a great position in which to practice your deep, 3-part breathing. Try to stay here for 2-3 minutes, then slowly swing your legs back around, relaxing while curled on your side for a few breaths, and then sit up.

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