

Our Postpartum Truth - In Her Words: My Anger

By Michele Inzelbuch, LCSW, LCADC

Postpartum depression can manifest in different ways with each individual. Many women suffer from symptoms of anxiety, depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). They may also experience a variety of other symptoms such as constant worry, a sense of doom, racing thoughts, changes in sleep or eating habits, fear of being alone, restlessness and medical worries to name a few.

A new baby adds more responsibilities to the mother. If she is struggling with any of these symptoms, frustration and anger can be what the family notices first. Managing care for a newborn while feeling overwhelmed by anxiety, worry or racing thoughts can be extremely stressful to the mother and anger becomes a way of coping. It can have a negative impact on the individual and family members, but it is a big indicator that mom needs help.

Having some quiet time away from the baby so that she can tend to taking care of herself is extremely important. Family members stepping up to do household chores, cook a meal, or feed the baby can take some of the daily pressures off and reduce stress.

It takes a lot of energy to care for a newborn. Support from family and friends can benefit a new mom in many ways by giving her time for self-care, reducing feelings of isolation, be a positive distraction and most importantly, let her know she is cared for and not alone.

Many women have discussed that their anxiety, though directed at themselves, tends to be released outwards on those closest to them. Often, we see other moms who appear happy and carefree leading to feelings of inadequacy and adding to negative emotions. Family members and older children frequently take the brunt of the anger. The guilt that follows can worsen symptoms and leave a woman feeling trapped in a cycle of negativity.

This month, women in recovery from Postpartum Depression and Postpartum Anxiety share their experience on the topic of their anxiety and anger with hope of bringing about a deeper understanding of PPD/PPA and recovery to the community.

N.D. - "I usually got angry when my patience ran out or when irrational thoughts were in my head." Struggling with a high level of anxiety, N.D. would often feel attacked or insulted when dealing with other people. "I have always been very sensitive and the PPD/A made it worse." When a situation became too much she would remove herself from what was triggering the anger. "I usually close myself in a room when I am really angry because I need to when I am anxious," she said. "I did fear becoming violent at times, but I would rather decompress by

myself and explain to them [children] calmly later that mommy needed a time out." Allowing herself to calm down can lower the anxiety in that moment and let the anger subside to avoid an angry outburst. She would rather feel guilty for shutting everyone out for a bit than regret becoming verbally or physically violent.

L.M. - Anger can be directed at oneself but present itself as anger towards others. "I'm angry because I can't control anything," L.M. shared. "Especially not a 5 year old with her own mind who is out in public and who is not perfect and doesn't always listen. I'm angry that I'm not the happy, put together, cupcake baking, Zen, working mom who takes things one minute at a time with grace and makes parenting look easy." Putting pressure on oneself to be the perfect mom is harmful to our self-esteem and sets an unrealistic goal. No one is the perfect mom no matter how they appear. Be mindful when using social media that what you see is people at their best and it is a one-second snapshot of a moment. Just because a photo makes them look like the poster mom of happiness, it doesn't mean their house isn't a mess with piles of laundry to do. Give yourself a break and set realistic goals that are attainable for you.

J.D. - "Everything became a trigger to me and I so easily went from happy to raging," she said. "I had zero patience. I'd rage, scream, say things I didn't mean and then feel like the worst person in the world for the things I said and for making my child cry." She swore she would not do it again but it would happen again and again. She was angry and stuck in a negative cycle. There was no physical violence but verbal outbursts happened frequently leaving her with a lot of guilt. The anxiety lessened her ability to be patient and everything became a stressor.

M.W. - "I don't recall being angry; more being scared, sad, and depressed." The anger she did experience came from family members comparing her parenting to others. "If I had any anger it was towards those who told me it wasn't all about myself anymore, who praised the parenting/bond of others while in front of me." For example, when her mom commented on how well her sister did with the baby. "That really got me angry, but the anger was covered by my anxiety," she said. She also noticed a decrease in tolerance and patience.

M.T. - The anger came on gradually for M.T. after months of her partner not helping as much as she needed, and her symptoms began to surface. "As the months passed and the depression became more and more anxiety, the anger began to increase," she shared. The anxiety brings on the anger and it is necessary to address the anxiety in order to recover from the anger. "My older child received the brunt of

the outbursts. I said mean things, cursed at him and every moment of every day, I wish I could take it all back." One rage-filled outburst scared M.T. and she worried she could have hurt her older child if the anger got the best of her. She decided to make a medication change to better treat the anxiety. "I am now able to explain to my children, "Mommy needs a time out." The insight and control that she had in the moment that prevented the rage from becoming physical did not prevent the verbal outbursts.

Already having feelings of guilt and shame from their inability to enjoy their new baby, the anger and rage can be yet another complication to Postpartum Depression and Anxiety. For many of these women, they fear that their verbal outbursts may have caused long-term harm to their children. These mothers struggle with self-forgiveness. Thankfully, none of them ever became physically violent with their children.

It is important to reach out and ask for help if you are struggling. A partner or family member may not know why you are feeling so angry so it is imperative to communicate your feelings and let them know how they can help. In moments of anger it is okay to take a break and calm yourself down before dealing with a stressful situation. As long as the baby is clean, fed, and safe in their crib, take some time to do deep breathing, a simple task or even lay down to rest. You cannot take care of a child if you do not take care of yourself! Be sure to let your partner know how they can help and give them some tasks to do to lessen the burden on you and share the parental responsibilities.

For the new mom from a survivor - The anger is the anxiety. Do not let it turn into rage. Get help, find an outlet. Half the battle is forgiving yourself for feeling the way you do, prevent yourself from having more self-forgiveness that is needed. If you relate to our words, then you know you are not alone.

If you or someone you know has concerns regarding PPD or is showing symptoms, do not ignore them. You are not alone and there is help out there. Please reach out to the Central Jersey Family Health Consortium at 732-937-5437, the Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorder Program at Monmouth Medical Center at 732-923-5573, or Michele Inzelbuch, LCSW, LCADC at 732-704-4331.

Michele D. Inzelbuch LCSW, LCADC

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654 Newman Springs Road, Lincroft, NJ 07738
www.micheledinzelbuchllc.com
Michele.inzelbuch@gmail.com

