

Dr. Shah, Community Health Choice's medical director, recently was interviewed about common experiences and best practices for new mothers. Here are his responses:

**Q: Have you heard of moms thinking they may have “mommy brain”?**

**A:** People have different ways of referring to this period of time immediately after delivery. New moms have a million competing priorities, and they're all experiencing general mental and physical fatigue. These realities combine to help new moms become forgetful and lose their focus. New moms can rest assured that pregnancy didn't take away a piece of their brain, they simply have new priorities on their minds. This should be short-lived phenomena, but moms can take supplements like zinc, B12 and folic acid to help with their symptoms.

**Q: Is “mommy brain” diagnosable? (Sometimes new moms feel like they're more forgetful or are in a “fog”).**

**A:** So-called “mommy brain” is normal and not something clinically diagnosed. It is important to appreciate that it is not a disorder; it's a phase most moms go through, because they have so many new things going on and other facts and figures fall by the wayside. The fogginess or forgetfulness after giving birth isn't something to worry about unduly, because it will usually improve over time. The best way to deal with the fog or forgetfulness after giving birth is to eat well, maintain a healthy lifestyle, get sleep, and reduce stress.

**Q: What do you recommend to moms who are under the pressures/stresses of a newborn and a feeding schedule?**

**A:** First, understand that there are some things you can control and others you can't. Second, be flexible. Certainly, if you are a new parent, read up on what to expect so you have a better sense of what's going to happen. The uncertainty of things is usually what causes the most stress. Newborn babies generally have ever-changing feeding and sleep cycles to suit their individual sleep and food needs. Trying to feed a baby that is not ready, or delaying a feed because it is too soon, can make the feed inefficient and unrewarding for both of you.

Do your best to maintain a sense of normalcy through a schedule—but again, understand it's not always up to you. Try to get enough rest by taking naps, and participate in healthy activities and routines. Moms can also involve their child in this healthy lifestyle.

Moms should not expect themselves to be able to deal with these new priorities overnight. These, at times, unusual demands and pressures are normal situations that new parents find themselves in, but feeling overwhelmed doesn't mean that YOU'RE abnormal. New moms should share the stress with others – don't be afraid to reach out to your support system: spouse, family or friends. Also, take some time for yourself, even if it's just a brief moment.

**Q: What advice do you give to new parents about getting rest?**

**A:** It's going to be hard at first. Your infant has very different sleeping and eating cycles than you. You're not likely to get a full night's rest initially. Fortunately, the time frame in which the child doesn't sleep through the night is usually short. It's not always practical, but start by trying to share responsibilities, such as rotating nighttime feedings with your spouse or partner. If that isn't possible, see if friends and family can help. Finally, try to rest up during the day while your baby sleeps. The human body is amazing with what it can tolerate, but it reaches a breaking point. This is not just a sleep issue, but also how to maintain as much health as possible given the circumstances. Often, if we're not sleeping well, we're also not eating well or keeping up with healthy activities.

**Q: What do you recommend to moms who think they may be experiencing postpartum depression?**

**A:** The most important thing is to recognize that something might not be right. Never minimize or dismiss the feelings you're feeling. Talk to somebody and get help. The period of time after having a child is always stressful. Sleep cycles get disrupted and our physiology, psychology and family structures get tested. Postpartum depression (PPD) affects 10 percent to 15 percent of mothers within the first year after giving birth. While feeling blue after you deliver is normal, depression is not and requires help.

Postpartum depression is a type of depression typically seen during the first 4 to 6 weeks after delivering a baby, but it can occur months after. Imagine a spectrum, where at one end, a new mom is tired, irritable, emotional, sad, and stressed. That's normal and expected; you've just delivered a baby. If these emotions go beyond the first several weeks, and you're having trouble functioning, it's highly likely you're experiencing the signs and symptoms of postpartum depression. At the other end of the spectrum, however, the feelings of sadness and fear, the blues, have intensified to become overwhelming, affecting your ability to handle the daily tasks of life. It goes beyond feeling sad or tired; your mental health and decision-making is affected. The most extreme end of the spectrum is when these feelings are so intense that they cause a new mom to want to hurt herself or her baby.

There is no shame in being depressed. Reach out to people; talk about what you're feeling. If you're on the lighter end of the spectrum, you don't necessarily have to talk with a doctor, you can talk with family members, clergy, etc. If you're on the other end, if you feel as if you're going to hurt yourself or your family, get immediate help. New moms should also understand that if they're predisposed to depression, they may be more susceptible to postpartum depression.

While unfortunately some people still experience a stigma around behavioral health issues, or what has been termed mental illness, postpartum depression is an issue that is better recognized and has a clearer cause and effect. More people can relate to, have heard about, or understand it on some level. Fortunately, there is increasing awareness about postpartum depression, and most medical providers know to "screen" for it. Medical providers will actively ask questions to determine if a new mom is at risk, and are prepared to help.



***Dr. Aashish Shah, Vice President and Medical Director for Community Health Choice***

*Dr. Shah is a physician specializing in obstetrics. He recently was appointed to the Texas Healthcare Transformation and Quality Improvement Program Women Health/Birth Outcomes Workgroup, and has significant experience with new mothers. Dr. Shah was honored to be named one of the Houston Business Journal's "40 Under 40" leaders in Houston, as well as being named one of Five Outstanding Young Houstonians by the Houston Jaycees.*

*Community Health Choice has helped hundreds of thousands of new mothers in greater Sugar Land, Houston and the Southeast Texas region for 18 years. Dr. Shah has been Vice President and Medical Director since 2011.*