

## **MOMS AND MOM WANNABES: 10 WAYS TO OVERCOME DEPRESSION AND RECLAIM YOUR SANITY**

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### **Women As Mothers**

The primary focus of most women's lives is children- whether to have them, whether they can have them, when to have them, and the joys and stresses involved once they have them.

Our society often assumes that women want to become mothers, so it is not surprising that many women grow up expecting to be mothers. The stories they tell about their lives, as well as their expectations and plans for the future, are frequently about mothering children. Thus, motherhood is perceived as a defining feature of womanhood in our society. As a result, for many women, these societal beliefs shape their lives and expectations about becoming and being mothers.

Because women's lives are so often defined by being or not being a mother, there is enormous pressure on women to have children and to be "perfect" mothers. These expectations are often unrealistic and, as a result, can put a great deal of pressure on women.

For example, although it is perfectly normal and natural for women to want to have children, often when they are unable to because of infertility, or the lack of a partner, it can be devastating. Likewise, when women have children, they often devote themselves to motherhood, sometimes at their own expense. They can sometimes feel extremely guilty if they do not feel like they are being the "perfect mother".

Unfortunately, the stresses and strains around becoming, not becoming, or being a mother, can cause a great deal of distress and women often end up struggling with depression.

In fact, the rates of depression among women at any stage of wanting to become or being a mother are very high.

## **When the Hope of Motherhood is Thwarted: The Case of Infertility**

Infertility seriously disrupts plans for motherhood. When women are unable to conceive easily, they often feel helpless, confused, and like their lives are out of control. Their sense of self-worth may plummet because their identity is so strongly associated with getting pregnant and becoming a mom.

Infertility is usually experienced as a personal and social “failure.” Women that are not mothers often feel stigmatized and may be afraid that others view them as desperate, “broken”, and worthless, and take pity on them.

## **The Sorrow of What Might Have Been: The Case of Pregnancy Loss**

Losing a baby at any stage of pregnancy is painful. It is not only a physical and emotional loss, but also the loss of a dream and a desired future. The shock, anger, loneliness, sadness, guilt, and yearning for another baby can be overwhelming at times. What makes it even more difficult is the experience of a death without anything tangible to mourn. Women often feel that they are going through the intense feeling of loss, alone.

Family and friends may be uncertain how to respond. Often, they may do nothing or avoid the woman or couple who experienced the loss. Miscarriage is a very visible and tangible loss to the woman going through it, but she may feel unseen, unrecognized, and very alone.

## **The New Mother: The Case of Postpartum Depression**

Even though women typically want to be mothers, they are sometimes not fully prepared for motherhood. There is often a gap between the expectation of motherhood, idealized by the media, and the real experience of motherhood. Many women expect “pure delight” and are surprised to realize that motherhood is not what they expected.

Even moms who wanted to have baby more than anything may find themselves overwhelmed and dragged down. Depression can set in shortly after the baby’s birth, or at a later stage, and when it happens, women easily fall into thinking they are “bad mothers”. This can lead to a downward spiral causing more depression.

Motherhood is socially constructed as a wholly positive experience, thus any negative, or ambivalent experiences surrounding motherhood are portrayed as unnatural and “bad”. This tension between a woman’s reality and that of her culture can cause significant distress. The paradoxical nature of the mothering experience is that, in reality, satisfaction coexists with boredom, hard work, and pain. However, this is rarely acknowledged or talked about.

There is also a myth that once a child is born, a mother will immediately know what to do to take care of him/her. Yet, first-time moms may feel terrified by their lack of knowledge of what to do with a baby, even after reading books or watching other mothers.

The fact is that motherhood is an acquired skill; childcare skills have to be learned; and taking care of subsequent children after the first one is not always easier.

Real motherhood is very different from the “myth” of motherhood. When the expectation of motherhood is different from what one imagined, it can lead to disappointment and depression. The depression can be situational, or it can become chronic.

The negative feelings caused by the day to day “drudgery” of motherhood; the everyday emotional ups and downs; the “invisible nature of mothering”; and the fact that women often feel they are not living up to the expectations of motherhood can lead many moms to feel inadequate. To avoid this feeling, they may work very hard to become super moms, super wives, super everything. In the long run these “super” roles can lead to exhaustion, burn-out, and a feeling of emptiness.

### **The Day-to-Day Life of Motherhood: The Case of Being a Supermom**

Working mothers often feel that they are on a treadmill- running, but not getting anywhere. It is easy to feel bogged down by the repetitive, inescapable work of child care day in and day out, in comparison to structured, goal-oriented professional work. For new mothers, the change from full-time employment to full-time motherhood, or full-time employment and full-time motherhood can be extremely stressful.

Many women may be torn between the responsibility they feel towards their children and opportunities that arise to advance their carrier. They may feel that they are spinning too many plates (professional work, house-

work, child care, rest time) in the air. No matter how much effort they put in, they are often only barely keeping it all together.

Working mothers often feel they are between a rock and a hard place. They may be judged by their family or community and experience "mother blaming," because their work-related activities are taking time away from their children. Many may think that their place should be home with their children. This "blaming" may intensify a woman's own sense of guilt for leaving her children to go to work. Feeling like a failure as a mother can often lead to deep depression.

### **Motherhood and Intimacy: The Case of Relationship Stress in Marriage**

In most marriages, women still do the child-rearing and home-making. Research shows that mothers experience greater family-work strain than fathers do. Mothers often realize that their lives have completely changed and that this change was greater for them than it was for their partners. This may explain why women feel less satisfied by their relationships after having children.

The "burden of care" often isolates women from their partners, family, and friends. It may also lead to resentment of their partners for not having to give up as much to take care of their babies. What makes matters worse is that partners may not understand why it is so difficult to adjust to motherhood, since their day-to-day life remains the same. A mother's identity and responsibilities are carried into the work place: even at work, women have to be parents, thinking and worrying about their children.

According to published studies, mothers in dual-income families have more positive experiences at work than at home. In contrast, their husbands' experiences are the opposite- they associate more negative emotions with work and more positive ones with home. The major cause of these differences is the fact that men tend to do less housework and child-care, thus enjoying more relaxed time at home than their wives.

Interestingly, both single and married moms seem to spend comparable amounts of time on family and childcare responsibilities.

If you find yourself at any of the above stages and are experiencing stress or depression the tips below might be of help.

## 10 Ways to Cope with Depression

### 1. Take Care of Yourself

Physical health plays a major role in your resilience to stress. To help you cope with depression you should improve your sleep; eat well; and get enough physical and pleasurable activity. Refraining from smoking and excess use of caffeine and sugar should also help decrease symptoms of depression.

If you are stressed out, you need rest. Sleep is the most important source of rest. Like sleeping, eating is basic to your physical health and to keeping your body feeling good. Try to be active and get out of bed and walk, even if it's just a little bit- every healthy meal you eat and every bit of exercise you get can help you feel more energized.

A major problem for many women is that they are so busy nurturing others that it is easy to forget about nurturing themselves. For some, it may become difficult to mobilize their energy to take care of themselves.

Whether you are recovering from a failed infertility treatment; have lost a pregnancy; are caring for a newborn; or are working and trying to manage child care, think about taking small steps to improve your physical and mental health. When your needs are not being met and you feel stressed-out and/or depressed, your capacity to care for others is reduced.

### 2. Recognize and Take Hold of your Stressors

Think about situations that trigger stress for you. The stressful nature of many women's lives makes them susceptible to depression. The subjective experience of stressful events plays a significant role in depression. Other vulnerabilities include history of losses, feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem.

Stress can be divided into two categories: fateful and self-generated. **Fateful stress** is unavoidable and is caused by things like loss of a loved one, illness, and/or death. **Self-generated stress** is brought about by behaviors such as being a perfectionist, working too hard, having relationship conflict, and being self-critical. While

fateful stress cannot be controlled, self-generated stress can be both controlled and managed by staying mindful of it.

Recognizing stressors and learning how to cope with them will help you recover from, and cope with, depression. Take charge and identify anything that you may be doing to contribute to the stress, such as: taking on too many responsibilities, neglecting yourself, engaging in unsupportive relationships, or not seeking support when you need it.

### **3. Take a Break and Reflect Upon What You Want and Need**

Take time away from whatever is causing stress in your life. What is not working out for you? Stepping away from the situation will give you a sense of safety and allow even intense and painful emotions to heal.

Try to find meaning in the challenges you are experiencing. Reflect on the changes that are occurring in your life and find ways to incorporate these new experiences even though it may be difficult and/or painful. Try to understand what about being a mother is distressing you. Acknowledge the complexity of your experience—resolving painful feelings may lead to you eventually feeling good about the difficulties you were able to overcome.

We do not live our lives passively; we actively try to understand, interpret, and explain our experience by sharing with friends, ministers, our partners, or even a therapist. Telling the story and evaluating what has happened can be very helpful and help you gain some sense of clarity and control during the difficult life transitions.

### **4. Recognize your Strengths**

With time, you will be able to integrate all of the changes you are experiencing into your identity. Although this transition may be overwhelming initially, it can be an opportunity for growth. You may emerge with a new sense of yourself as a woman, mother, and/or professional.

Most losses and crises will initially shatter your identity and require re-integration. With time, however, these difficulties can strengthen your identity and sense of self. You may learn to view yourself as a

good and capable person. Over time, as you reflect on your experience, you may see that even though these experiences were difficult, you have gained control over them.

For some women, the experience of loss and suffering leads to a deeper appreciation for parenthood and for the suffering of others. It may give them a greater sense of confidence as a woman, mothers, and/or professionals and this may lead to a greater sense of control in their life. It may also allow them to achieve a better self-understanding.

## **5. Avoid the Super Woman/Supermom Trap**

Try to adjust to the fact that things do not always turn out the way you had hoped for. Do not take responsibility for the things you cannot control (e.g., difficulty getting pregnant or a miscarriage) but fail to take responsibility for the things you can control (e.g., interpersonal conflicts or taking on too many responsibilities). You may already be aware of the serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change things I can, and the wisdom to tell the difference." Do not try to manage work, care for your family, and tackle the household chores all on your own.

Make lists of your daily/weekly tasks and share it with your partner or family. Ask family members for help with childcare, or hire a babysitter. You can be a competent woman, wife, mother, employee, even if you do not try to be a perfect woman. Stop being self-critical.

## **6. Do Not Let Others Dismiss What You are Going Through**

"Just relax and you'll feel better," or "It's just hormones." These kinds of statements by others imply that it is easy to make changes, when it usually is not. Do not let other people diminish your difficulties or feelings. Voice your concerns because what you are feeling is valid- do not let anyone tell you otherwise.

Do not let your partner, family, or coworkers dismiss what you are going through or take you for granted. Society often expects women to be selflessly committed to their family and work. It is easy to feel unappreciated and ignored when your experience is devalued. People minimizing your difficulties can be demoralizing

when you are going through a difficult situation and making changes. Stand up for yourself- if you find it difficult to do this, get someone to help you.

## **7. Acknowledge Gender Differences**

Acknowledge the fact that there are gender differences in being a parent or desiring to be a parent. Career goals and relationships tend to be the main focus for men for most of their adulthood. Priorities tend to change for women. Although women in their twenties may focus on their career, marriage and motherhood often become priorities for women in their thirties.

Men are motivated by the desire for money and power, while women appreciate social interactions- their relationships are their motivating force. Research shows that men worry about three things daily: money, their job, and their immediate family. Women, on the other hand, worry about twelve things: money, their job, their immediate family, their extended family, their friends, how their home looks... It seems easier to think about three things than twelve, does it not?

Men and women handle problems differently: women tend to ruminate, while men tend to come up with a solution so they can watch TV or read their paper. Men often do a better job at pushing aside any concerns and focusing on their jobs. That is much harder for many women, especially those who have a family to care of or are trying to start a family. A woman's desire to be a mother, or to be a good mother, does not stop when she walks into work.

Acknowledge your different perspectives, your disappointments and your frustrations. Do not expect your partner to meet all your needs and do not get mad at him when he doesn't.

## **8. Find Support in Other Women**

Supportive relationships are the cornerstone of healing. Many women who are depressed feel profoundly alone and isolated. When you make contact with others who understand what you are going through and show compassion, healing comes easier. Establishing and rebuilding supportive friendships; family relationships; and intimate relationships is the best route to recovery.

Remember that the single-most powerful buffer against depression is an intimate, confiding relationship; yet the single most potent perpetuator of depression is a stable, unhealthy relationship where conflict dominates.

Help those who support you. Coach them and let them know that they do not need to do anything to fix you. Listening and assuring you that you are not alone might be the most helpful thing they can do. You can let them know that you have other sources of support, such as a psychotherapist, or a support group, so that they will not feel the pressure of being your sole support.

Stay involved with your friends. Make time for social activities and friends, even if all you do is talk on the phone or have coffee during the week.

## **9. Do Not Give up on Your Dreams**

Many women take breaks from their careers, and social lives at various stages of their lives. We all face obstacles in pursuing our professional and personal goals and things do not always go as planned.

There are a variety of factors that lead women astray from their goals, or at least force them onto the back burner. Some of these factors include: struggles with infertility; having small children; suffering a personal loss; and experiencing a disintegration of your support system when you need it the most. Even though you put your dreams on hold, it is important not to give up on them altogether. Keep them in your consciousness with the intention of returning to them when the time is right.

When you have had to put off your goals, it can be difficult to re-ignite the dream. However, just because it is challenging does not mean it is impossible. Most things are never impossible regardless of how long you put them on hold.

You will be more likely to achieve goals you have put in hold if you have:

- Specific goals: get clear on exactly what you want
- A positive attitude: believe in yourself, no matter what

- A mapped-out plan: visualize and plan out the steps that need to happen in order to achieve your goal
- Time-lines: create a time-line with small achievable tasks you can accomplish over a long period of time

Even though you make yourself available to your child, your partner, and your family as a whole, you can also take responsibility for achieving your dreams. If you lack self-confidence and find it hard to rely on yourself, find people who believe in you and support you.

If you are passionate about something, chances are you will be happier when you start working toward that dream, as will everybody else around you. Enlist assistance when needed, and scale back your other commitments where you can. If you sacrifice your dream for others, you will eventually become unhappy and resentful of the people around you. This can lead to a downward spiral of unfulfilled needs and, eventually, depression.

## **10. Get Professional Help When Needed**

The good news is that depression is reversible! Finding ways to manage stress through psychotherapy can be a good option for healing- sometimes it is the only one. You have not failed as a woman or a mother if you need help.

If you are finding it hard to manage on your own, counseling may help you keep your sanity. Getting through depression, stress, and personal losses may require a trained individual who knows how to help you predict and navigate the common stressors more quickly. Studies show that psychotherapy is as effective for mild to moderate depression as medication is.

By becoming more aware of your tendencies, you can be more in-control. You can translate hindsight into foresight and take action earlier instead of collapsing from exhaustion, going for the ice cream, or exploding with emotion. Making changes can be scary, but they may make you more fun to be around.

Sadly, depression undermines your hopes, your agency, and your creativity in problem solving. Being hopeful does not mean that you do not have any fears or doubts. Do not give up- hope takes courage and you do not have to do it alone.

## **About Dr. Irena Milentijevic**

Dr. Irena Milentijevic is a licensed psychologist in private practice who specializes in helping moms and those hoping to become moms cope with stress, depression and loss.. Her focuses are women with pregnancy-related issues, including infertility and high-risk pregnancies, pregnancy loss- depression, post-partum depression, and women struggling with parenting young children. Her number one priority is to help women feel better about themselves and feel empowered about their choices.

If you want help in coping with depression, contact Dr. Irena for a **FREE 10-minute phone consultation**. She can be reached at (281)267-1742.

**Dr, Milentijevic's counseling offices are located in the Woodlands and the Houston Medical Center.**