



Counseling and
Consulting, LLC®

Coping with Maternal Stress and Depression

by Cynthia Good Mojab, MS, IBCLC, RLC, CATSM
www.lifecirclecc.com • 503-615-0845

Stress is a part of life. Stressors can vary in magnitude from daily hassles to traumatic events. Too much stress can negatively affect our well-being. Chronic stress can contribute to the development of depression—a treatable illness with emotional, mental, physical, and social consequences. Depression is common in new mothers, reflecting the major life changes, role conflicts, hard work, and inadequate support with which many mothers cope. In the first year after birth, 10 to 20% of mothers experience clinical depression.¹ If mothers are coping with multiple-birth children or prematurity, that percentage can be at least twice as high.² Depression can manifest in mothers in many ways: sadness, an inability to feel interest or pleasure, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, irritability and agitation, hopelessness and pessimism, physical aches and pains, disturbances in appetite and sleep, poor concentration and “foggy” thinking, lack of energy, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.³ Mothers can also feel anxious, like they’ve lost control, overwhelmed, angry, guilty, like something has broken, and as though they will never be themselves again. Chronic stress and depression harm everyone they touch: the mother, her partner, and her children.^{1,2,4} If you think you may be depressed, ask your primary health care provider to refer you to a mental health care provider knowledgeable about maternal depression who can help you identify treatment options. Whenever medications are considered for the treatment of depression, discuss the information available in *Medications and Mothers’ Milk: A Manual of Lactational Pharmacology* with your health care provider.⁵ Most medications are compatible with breastfeeding.⁵

One way to remember coping strategies that can help a mother reduce stress and relieve depression is to consider the critical importance of **self care**.

S	support
E	emotions
L	learn
F	focus
C	change
A	align
R	renew
E	empathy

Ask for **support** in specific ways. No one was meant to mother alone. Support can be social, like talking with your partner or a friend, attending a support group, participating in a religious community, or consulting a counselor. It can also be practical, such as help with childcare, meals, housework, or errands.

Attend to your **emotions**. They are important messages about your needs. Express them in conversation, writing, drawing, dance, or counseling. Recognize and express the positive and negative emotions that you feel. Life experiences can be both joyful *and* very difficult. Both kinds of emotions need appreciation.

Learn about the impact that stress and depression have on you and your family. Learn how to reduce stress and relieve depression. Learn about parent, child, and family development so that you can develop realistic expectations of yourself and the other members of your family. Look carefully at your life to learn what *is* working. Then do more of what works well!

Focus on the things that are most important to you—that nourish all aspects of your and your family’s well-being. Let the unimportant things go. Say “No” to things that increase your stress and that are not needed in your life. Say “Yes” to whatever meets your and your family’s needs.

Change is always needed to reduce stress and relieve depression. Resolve to make the changes you need to make. Start small. Change one manageable thing as your first goal. One change will lead to others. Find a partner in change—someone who will exercise with you, work on better nutrition along with you, or attend a support group with you. Because change can be challenging, it is easier to make changes when you have someone to keep you company.

Align your life with your values and basic human needs. This will help you prioritize so that you spend your time and energy on what really matters to you. Every human being needs autonomy (choice), celebration (honoring joys and sorrows), integrity (meaning, genuineness), interdependence (love, connection, empathy, community, contribution), physical nurturance (food, shelter, rest, physical expression), play (laughter, fun), and spiritual communion (peace, inspiration, beauty).⁶ When your basic needs are met, you may feel thankful, joyful, and hopeful. When they are unmet, you may feel distressed, sad, and discouraged.

Renew all aspects of yourself: body, mind, heart, and spirit. Get adequate nutrition, rest, and exercise. Consult a health care provider so you can address any physical health issues that cause or are caused by stress and depression. Use your body in ways enjoyable to you, such as dancing, gardening, or hiking. Take care of your mind by finding peaceful time, meditating, being in the present, and learning what you need to learn. Nurture your heart with friendship, crying when you need to, writing in a journal, or sharing what you are feeling and thinking with someone else. Care for your spirit by spending time in nature, meditating, reading or writing poetry, singing or listening to music, praying, or worshiping in a way that is meaningful to you.

Have **empathy** for yourself and receive it from others. Give yourself the compassion and patience you would give a friend if she were in your situation. Life can be quite challenging. Balancing your needs with those of your family can be very difficult, especially when you are mothering young children. Many mothers find it hard to get the support they really need to feel and function well. Surround yourself with people who understand what you are going through. Consider joining a support group or engaging in counseling related to issues that concern you. Support groups and counselors can be an incredible source of empathy, validation, and ideas.

Self care isn't selfish. Do it for you. Do it for your family.

¹ Kendall-Tackett, K. *Depression in New Mothers: Causes, Consequences, and Treatment Alternatives*. New York: The Hawthorn Maltreatment and Trauma Press 2005.

² Beck, C. and Driscoll, J. *Postpartum Mood and Anxiety Disorders: A Clinician's Guide*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett 2006.

³ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 2000*.

⁴ Kendall-Tackett, K. *The Hidden Feelings of Motherhood: Coping with Mothering Stress, Depression, and Burnout*. Amarillo, TX: Pharmasoft 2005.

⁵ Hale, T. *Medications and Mothers' Milk: A Manual of Lactational Pharmacology*. Hale Publishing 2006.

⁶ Rosenberg, M. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press 2003.



Cynthia Good Mojab is a Clinical Counselor and an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant. She is Certified in Acute Traumatic Stress Management and is a member of the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress. She is a member of *Mothering* magazine's Expert Panel, answering questions about breastfeeding and maternal mental health. She is also a nationally recognized speaker on breastfeeding, parenting, culture, and psychology. Through her private practice, LifeCircle Counseling and Consulting, LLC in Hillsboro, Oregon, Cynthia offers in-person and telephone services addressing the needs of women during their reproductive and parenting years. For more information, please call 503-615-0845 or visit www.lifecirclecc.com.