



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Arrival Adjustment: The Post-Adoption Blues

by Patricia Irwin Johnston

Post-arrival confusion, anxiety and minor depression is relatively common among parents. Some sources claim that at least 50% of parents—both fathers and mothers—suffer from the Baby Blues. Unlike the more serious medical condition known as postpartum depression, Baby Blues are not necessarily influenced by hormonal fluctuations. That's why it's just as likely that dads as well as moms may experience Baby Blues whether they become parents by birth or by adoption. Many factors contribute to the Baby Blues, no matter how the child arrives. Becoming a parent is in itself a major life change. Many parents—including those who have prepared themselves well—initially feel inadequate for such an enormous responsibility when a real baby is finally in their arms. No matter at what age the new child arrives, new parents' sleep patterns are usually interrupted as they doze with one ear tuned to the needs of a small person in unfamiliar surroundings. Parents may eat differently or even skip meals entirely when distracted by a needy small person. Schedules and routines fall by the wayside and life begins to feel out of control. A child who is particularly fussy or anxious, who is experiencing some attachment difficulties, or who is medically fragile may create an early parenting experience far different from the idyllic one dreamed of for so long.

Issues specific to adoption may contribute to post-arrival depression too. Enormous excitement surrounds the arrival of a new member of the family, but what if you're worried that grandparents or aunts and uncles won't accept this child? And what about the insensitive comments that ignorant but usually well meaning others throw about? And what if it doesn't feel the way you expected that it would? And what if you're finding that this new experience is re-triggering old memories? And what if you are feeling consumed with worry or guilt about your child's birthparents' loss?

New parents usually take time away from work. But despite recent U.S. federal laws which support the need for adoptive parents to have leave, some employers may be less than cooperative if they see post-arrival leave as a medical issue for those who give birth rather than as a parenting issue. Depending on whether you were able to plan this well in advance or were surprised by the timing of the adoption, being away from the job can produce anxiety and even guilt—both of which may be enhanced by the parent's berating of self for

not being able to forget the job and focus exclusively on the longed-for new arrival. For some people personal self-image is so intrinsically tied to their jobs that becoming a full-time parent, whether on temporary leave or as a change in lifestyle, can be difficult to adjust to.

Some new adopters find that infertility issues resurface briefly when their new child arrives, so that they feel some (usually temporary) sadness that this child is not connected to them genetically. Other adoptive parents are overwhelmed by feelings of sadness for the losses experienced by their child's birthfamily and find it difficult to allow themselves to feel joy rooted in another's grief. Still others find it difficult to let themselves fall unconditionally into love with a child during any period of time when a birthparent's decision may be revoked.

To help yourself or your partner in staving off or coping with post-arrival blues, try these tips, some of which have been offered before as general arrival tips:

- Acknowledge that you're only human. That approved homestudy may have felt like getting the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, but it didn't grant you status as Super-Parent-To-Be. Don't beat yourself up!
- The stay-at-home parent should shower and dress before the other parent leaves in the morning. Not only is it hard to find time for this later, but getting off to this kind of "fresh start" can set a tone for the day.
- Eat a balanced diet. (Those pre-arrival prepared foods suggested earlier can come in handy now, or suggest to friends who want to know what they can do to help that a carried-in meal would be welcomed far more than would "holding the baby.")
- Be kind to your head and to your soul. Hire a sitter (or recruit a friend or your partner) to give yourself a few minutes each day just for yourself—to take a leisurely bath, to read a book, to meditate, to make a phone call, etc.
- Relieve stress by remembering to exercise regularly... yoga stretches during nap time, a brisk walk around

the block while pushing a stroller, new parent aerobics or swimming classes (with daycare provided) at the local Y.

- Don't allow yourself to feel "trapped." Take the baby with you to the mall or a museum. Have lunch at Wendy's with a friend. Contact a parents' group.
- Feed your partnership. It's easy for new parents to forget that this came first and for parenting partners to feel cast aside by a devoted new parent.
- Be your own advocate for quiet time with your family as you adjust to one another and the changes that accompany this new experience. Well-wishers often forget that it isn't just the physically demanding experience of giving birth that puts new moms in need of help and rest, many birthfathers and adoptive parents experience "Cinderella syndrome" in the days following an arrival as they struggle to keep up with entertaining a constant flow of visitors.

The Baby Blues are normal, but that doesn't make them seem less scary. Seek help—from your parent group, from your child's pediatrician, from your social worker, from your family doctor— if the "down feelings" don't begin to dissipate in just a few weeks.

Resources

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