

Post Baby Body Blues

© Terri Sheldon and Dr Peta Stapleton 2008

The Lakeside Rooms, Suite 9 North Building,

34-36 Glenferrie Dr, Robina QLD 4226.

Tel 07 55 620 466. Web: www.slimminds.com

Having a baby is a wonderful time in any women's life. Your dreams of a warm, cuddly, sleepy bundle in your arms eventually arrives and so does the reality of learning to cope with their needs. While many books and resources outline strategies for sleeping and feeding and even hormonal changes, guidance for the new mother with her changed body is not as obvious.

While some women may easily lose their extra baby weight easily and rapidly, others find it can take months, even years. Your own desperate desire for sleep in the early days with a new infant will often take precedent over attending to your body's needs, but at some stage your infant will demand less and sleep more, and you may become acutely aware of yourself again.

So what happens when you look in the mirror and find that your body has changed and is not the same as it used to be, even if the changes are small. And what happens if what you see is not pleasing to you? It may be that your perception of your body is in need of a tune up.

Body image refers to an individual's perception of their body shape and size, and many factors can influence this perception. With a positive body image, a woman has a real perception of her size and shape and feels comfortable and proud about her body. With a negative body image, a woman has a distorted perception of her shape and size, compares her body to others, and feels shame, awkwardness, and anxiety about her body. A woman's dissatisfaction with her body affects how she thinks and feels.

Body image is influenced by several factors: early learning factors such as the words you heard about your body as a child; sociocultural factors such as what the media might suggest is the current fashion or shape size to be; your current situation (including just having had a baby) and eating habits (which will always be influenced by things such as tiredness, stress, being in love, or a lack of stimulation in a job).

One Australian study has found that actual post-natal weight proved the most important predictor of psychological well-being following

birth¹. So the shape of your body directly affects your emotional state. It has also been shown that fatigue as early as 7 days postpartum (after birth) is predictive of depression at Day 28 postpartum². Part of the answer then lies in looking after your body's physical requirements, in order to keep your body image and emotional needs.

While physically attending to your body with enough sleep, getting assistance with household chores, eating nutritionally rich foods and drinking adequate water is a recipe we have all heard before, how to attend to your emotional body image needs might not be as obvious. Much research this decade is focused on the pursuit of happiness and the attainment of optimism. And we mean *real* happiness, not a 'fake it til you make it' attitude. Being a truly optimistic person after you give birth has been shown to protect you against depression³ so it is well worth pursuing. Here's some tips on how to start:

Tip 1: Take note of your self talk. If you are being negative about aspects of yourself talk to someone about this. Remember that this is a time of adjustment for you and it takes a little time. Try to speak more kindly to yourself and give yourself credit for everything you are doing.

Tip 2: Prioritise some time each day for yourself, even if it is only half an hour to do something nice, like have a bath with nice essential oils or give yourself a facial or foot massage.

Tip 3: Try to fit in some regular exercise. Make some time to meet with friends and instead of making it a sedentary coffee at the shop or a sit down at home, make it an invigorating walk in a nice environment. If you can't do a walk spend some time visualising yourself exercising or walking as research has shown that visualising yourself exercising brings benefits too.

Tip 4: Don't be fooled by the celebrities in the magazines who look like they never had a baby a week later. Set some reasonable goals about your body shape and work towards what you want. Remember, it took you 9 months for your body and mind to adjust to being bigger and you will need to give your body and mind some time to adjust back to being smaller. Focus on being happy and healthy rather than on weight loss.

Tip 5: Remember that everyone is different about the way they feel about being a mum. Some people love it and it's their life's ambition to be home and focus on children. For others they need to still feel a sense of achievement in work or their career to feel good about

themselves. There is no right or wrong in this. Don't beat yourself up or feel guilty if you need other things in your life too.

References:

1. Jenkin W & Tiggemann M (1997). Psychological effects of weight retained after pregnancy. Women Health, 25(1):89-98.
2. Bozoky, I. & Corwin, E.J. (2002) Fatigue as a Predictor of Postpartum Depression. Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing, 31 (4), 436-443.
3. Carver, C.S. & Gollin Gaines, J (1987). Optimism, pessimism, and postpartum depression. Cognitive Therapy and Research, 11, (4), 449-462.

Dr Peta Stapleton and Terri Sheldon are two well known Australian psychologists with 35 years of combined clinical experience. They have developed the SlimMinds Program that teaches the latest effective psychological techniques to break out of that YoYo failure cycle that so often occurs with traditional weight loss programs. See www.slimminds.com