

OM MAMA: HOW MEDITATION HELPED ME THROUGH POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

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(Note: I wrote this while experiencing postpartum depression for the first time. Since then, I have learned that it takes a lot more than meditation to help many women recover.)

It's hard to say when my postpartum anxiety and depression took hold.

Looking back now, signs did point to something amiss right from day one.

I can remember hearing the nurse, shortly after our daughter, Eva, was born, say to my husband, "Doesn't she want to see her baby?"

With eyes closed and barely conscious I remember thinking: "What's the big deal? I know she's OK. Just let me sleep."

I wanted to be left alone.

I didn't want any visitors and I was relieved when the nurse took the baby to the nursing station for several hours that first night.

Although I had battled anxiety and depression in the past, I was determined not to let it resurface postpartum.

I remember my husband picking up a brochure on postpartum mood disorders at one of our prenatal classes and thinking, "that's not going to be me."

I didn't even want to look at it. And when it came to time to fill out all those hospital forms, I left the box blank next to the column for pre-existing medical conditions, even though anxiety was one of the ailments listed.

What I had done was set myself up for disaster so that by the time my daughter was seven months old and sleeping through the night, I was an emotional and mental wreck, and my physical health was in jeopardy. I had constant heart palpitations, I couldn't sleep, the muscles in my throat, chest, and stomach were gripped so tightly it was hard to breathe, and I had fearful and irrational thoughts such as the grim reaper coming to get me.

When I broke down in tears in front of my parents and confided in them that I no longer felt capable enough to look after Eva, they did their best to reassure me and encouraged me to hang on.

My friends, unaware of the extent of my condition — mainly because I never told them — kept reminding me that all new mothers go through a difficult period during the first year.

My husband, the only one who really knew what was going on — and even then I still kept a lot hidden from him — told me straight out to get help.

I'm so thankful he did because I eventually did get better, but not through the usual conventional means — and that's where the story really gets interesting.

I believe meditation is what cured me of postpartum anxiety and depression.

How I did it In spiritual circles, the “dark night of the soul” refers to that dark and lonely period in one's life that can be a turning point, leading us to greater illumination or further destruction, depending on which path we choose.

My own dark night of the soul came literally in the middle of the night when, after months of suffering, I cried out: “Why is this happening?” and “What do I have to do to stop it?”

Just then, I noticed a book that had lain dormant on my shelf for the better part of a year. I took it down and began reading. In *Calming Your Anxious Mind: How Mindfulness & Compassion Can Free You From Anxiety, Fear & Panic*, author Jeffrey Brantley writes:

“If you accept this challenge, commit to practicing meditation regularly, and have enough energy and discipline to make the practices in this book a part of your life, there is a very good chance you will begin a process of profound life change and transformation.”

And that's where my journey of meditation began.

I did it all on my own with the book as my guide. Each night before bed I would throw on a pair of headphones, listen to calming music, and either focus on my breath or engage in a visual meditation.

The effects were immediate and the benefits only intensified with each additional meditation. In mere days my sleep patterns began to improve — i.e., it didn't take me hours to fall asleep — and the tension in my muscles began to relax.

Within a few short weeks of regular daily practice, my heart palpitations diminished significantly and my fearful thoughts began losing their strength. And then one day about three months later it just all of a sudden hit me — it was gone.

The postpartum anxiety and depression were gone and I was positive it was thanks to meditation. Is there proof it works?

While recent studies show meditation to be a highly successful method of reducing stress, that results in noticeable brain changes within just eight weeks, and in some cases, has proven to be just as effective as medication in preventing the relapse of depressed patients, a direct scientific link between the benefits of meditation in relieving postpartum mood disorders has yet to be explored.

There is a U.S. study in its infancy right now that shows promising results with at-risk pregnant women engaged in a daily meditative and yoga practice, but it has yet to be proved postpartum at this stage.

Why you should consider meditation while pregnant I wish I had known about the power of meditation earlier on, specifically when I was pregnant.

Being “at-risk,” I know I would have benefitted tremendously from a daily meditation practice while pregnant, which probably would have lessened the chance or at the very least helped me cope with the potential for a postpartum mood disorder, says Dr. Zindel V. Segal, psychiatrist and Wilson Chair in depression studies at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto.

“For women at risk, it’s definitely of value. It’s a non-pharmacological means of prevention and should be offered in addition to other parenting classes and skills,” explains Dr. Segal. “It will affect how well a mother raises her child. The time to learn meditation is before [during pregnancy].”

So the ideal time may be during pregnancy, but that doesn’t mean parents won’t get the benefits of meditation if they wait until after the baby comes to learn about it. Easy ways to get started

While it may be unrealistic for new mothers to set aside time to meditate, there is a way to incorporate it into a mother’s busy schedule with what Lynne Tierney calls her “peace on the go” method.

Tierney runs a Moms and Babies meditation class at the Kadampa Meditation Centre in Toronto.

She says one of the greatest benefits of meditation is its ability to aid the body to heal. Tierney says a good time for mothers to meditate is while breastfeeding or holding the baby.

“Take a few minutes to imagine your breath going in and out of your nostrils — cool breath going in and warm breath coming out. If you notice your mind wandering, just gently bring it back to the breath. It’s as simple as that.”

Another helpful meditation to try, says Tierney, is the body scan.

“Put your awareness at the top of your head and begin scanning down through your body checking for and releasing any tension in the muscles.”

For a deeper meditation, try focusing on a single idea such as patience or kindness.

And for those of us on the creative side, a visual meditation may be more appealing by imagining a bright white light entering the body on the in breath followed by thick black smoke on the out breath releasing with it any stress or tension in the body.

Tierney says the more you practice, the more confidence you’ll build in your ability to bring about calmness to your inner world, “and when we are balanced internally, our outer world doesn’t feel as chaotic anymore.”

I can certainly vouch for that.

My daughter is now 20 months old and although I no longer suffer from postpartum anxiety and depression, I still keep a regular practice.

For not only has meditation cured me, it’s also transformed my life and the way I think about the world.

But perhaps the greatest gift that meditation has given me is the chance to take ownership of my suffering and ignite the healing power within.