



# THE POSTPARTUM STRESS CENTER

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## ARE YOU HAVING THOUGHTS THAT ARE SCARING YOU?

### IT MIGHT HELP YOU TO KNOW:

- Scary thoughts are a very common symptom of postpartum depression.
- Scary thoughts are negative, repetitive, unwanted, intrusive thoughts that can bombard you at any time. They can come out of nowhere.
- Scary thoughts can come in the form of thoughts ("what if I burn the baby in the bathtub?") or images (the baby falling off the changing table)
- Scary thoughts can be indirect or passive (something might happen to the baby) or they can imply intention (thoughts or images of you throwing the baby against the wall)
- Scary thoughts are NOT indication of psychosis. They may make you feel like you are going crazy but you are not.
- Scary thoughts can be part of a postpartum OCD diagnosis (postpartum Obsessive-compulsive disorder) or they may occur in the absence of a full blown diagnosis.
- If you have a history of OCD or tend to be a worrier or describe yourself as overly analytical or perfectionist, you may be at increased risk to experience this symptom. Then again, you may have NO history of any anxiety symptoms.
- Scary thoughts will make you feel like you're a bad mother. They will make you feel guilty and ashamed. Try not to beat yourself up about this. Remind yourself it is a symptom.

### THE NATURE OF THESE THOUGHTS:

- Scary thoughts typically focus on your baby, but can also center on thoughts about you, or your partner.
- Scary thoughts can range from mild to unbearable.
- Scary thoughts can be intermittent or constant.
- Scary thoughts may be fleeting or they may race in your head throughout the day or keep you from falling asleep at night.
- Scary thoughts may or may not be accompanied by compulsive behaviors (e.g. excessive checking)
- Some examples of scary thoughts:
  - "What if I drop my baby when I go down the steps?"
  - "What if I burn the baby in the bathtub?"
  - "I'm afraid I might take one of the knives in my kitchen and stab the baby" Or, "What if I slip and one of the knives falls on my baby"
  - "I can picture myself driving off the road with my baby in the car"
  - "I think my family would be better off without me"
  - "I'm having sexual thoughts about my baby."
  - "I can see terrible graphic violent things happening to my baby."

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

If you are worried about the thoughts you are having, that's a good sign. Of course you're worried. It's a terrible burden to feel so attached and loving toward your baby and have such scary thoughts at the same time. Having these thoughts probably make you feel enormously guilty. (You might think, "A good mother wouldn't be thinking such awful things.")

But good mothers DO think bad thoughts when they are struggling with depression and anxiety. If these thoughts do not feel consistent with who are you, if they seem totally out of character for you, or if you know they are irrational and make no sense, it shows that the thoughts are obsessive symptoms of acute anxiety.

Remember that these thoughts are NOT about who you are. They are symptoms. Your brain is playing a trick on you. The more you focus on them, the more you are telling your brain to believe them and the more you empower these thoughts. Try your best to distract yourself. Tell yourself that it's okay you're having these thoughts, nothing bad is happening and that you won't always feel this way. Keep your brain busy with other things. As silly as it may sound, it works. Focus on brain tasks, such as puzzles or other games that make you concentrate. Get up and out, take a walk, listen to upbeat music, dance, fool your brain into doing something else. It's hard, but it can help.

Scary thoughts can be so disturbing that it's hard to tell anyone how you are feeling or what you are thinking. Believe it or not, you might actually feel better if you tell someone you trust that you are having these thoughts. No one is going to take your baby away. No one is going to think you're a bad mother. Tell someone you trust that you don't feel good and that you know these thoughts are symptoms of depression. Let them reassure you that you will be okay when you get the treatment you need. Let them remind you that you are loved and safe.

The good news is that these thoughts are symptoms that are treatable and respond well to both medication and supportive therapy. This is why it's so important to ask for help. Talk to your partner. Talk to your doctor. Don't let your fear get in the way of you getting the help you need. Reach out to someone who understands. You deserve some relief. Do what you need to do to feel better.

\*If you feel that your thoughts are out of your control or that you cannot manage the intrusion, contact your healthcare provider immediately.

\*If at any time you feel you or your baby are not safe, please call 911 or have someone take you to an emergency room.

\*If you have been told that your thoughts are worrisome to others but they seem real to you, or you feel that your thoughts make sense and everyone around you must be the crazy ones, let someone close to you know how you are feeling and tell them it's an emergency.

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