

Mother Nurture

© Rick Hanson, Ph.D. and Jan Hanson, L.Ac. 2003

When You're Feeling Blue

I've been feeling down lately. Things that ought to be really enjoyable are just blah, I'm more irritable than usual, and all the changes I've gone through since becoming a mom a year ago seem to have finally caught up with me.

Because of the stresses and physical depletion that come – amidst all the wonderful parts! – with raising a family, about half of all mothers have significant feelings of sadness or depressed mood, and one in eight will go through a clinical depression. So if you are feeling blue, you're in good company!

First, you should make sure that you aren't clinically depressed, which means experiencing five or more of these symptoms for two weeks or longer: depressed mood; loss of pleasure in things that used to be enjoyable; weight loss; insomnia or hypersomnia; intense restlessness or sluggishness; fatigue; strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt; hard to concentrate or make decisions; recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

If you fulfill these criteria or come close, you should contact a therapist or doctor. Counseling is very effective for most depressions, and there are also many research-based alternatives to antidepressants listed in our book, *Mother Nurture*; antidepressants are a workable option about two-thirds of the time, typically combined with counseling.

Hopefully, you're not clinically depressed, and the suggestions below should help lift your spirits:

- Make sure you're in good health, since depressed mood is the single most common symptom among all illnesses; check with your doctor or a specialist in women's health.
- Try to get some kind of exercise three or four times a week; exercise is about as effective as antidepressants for mild depression.
- Also make sure you're taking a good multivitamin/multimineral supplement, and add to it a B-vitamin complex and some Omega-3 essential fatty acids (the "good fats" in fish oil), both of which have been shown to reduce depressed mood.
- Honestly acknowledge to yourself the harder parts of raising a family, and any losses you've experienced as a result of becoming a mother – and perhaps talk about them with your partner or a friend as well. Having compassion for yourself is not self-indulgent, but a good way to feel better and also stay at your best for your family.
- Pay attention to everything that's going well, not badly, and try to see the humor in your situation (see the box!).
- Talk back to pessimistic thoughts in your mind by arguing with them forcefully. A fundamental psychological skill is to be able to observe one's thoughts dispassionately and question how true or wise they are.
- Get out and have some fun. We know this sometimes seems impossible, but if you make it a priority – and talk with your partner about watching the children or make an arrangement with another mom to do something enjoyable together with your kids – it will certainly happen.

- Connect with other people. Women seem to have evolved to rely on “tend and befriend” more than “fight or flight” reactions to cope with stress; reaching out to others actually releases hormones that protect your body from stress. We often withdraw from people when we’re feeling down, but instead, try to call a friend.

“Top Ten Topics for Future Presentations at Our Mother’s Club”

This was a tongue-in-cheek list of future topics offered to the membership of a mother’s club:

10. Breasts - Here Today, Gone Tomorrow
9. Hips - Gone Today, Here Tomorrow
8. Timesaver - How to Starch Business Suits So You Can Sleep in Them
7. Dinner in a Diaper - New Product Idea
6. 365 Meals You Can Make with One Hand
5. Sex after Kids - When, Where, How, and *Why?*
4. How to Turn Spit Up Stains into Fashion Statements
3. Styling Techniques for Unwashed Hair
2. Baby Talk - I Understand It, and It Scares Me
1. How to Stop the Crying - Yours!

* * *

This column is offered freely to parent-related organizations. If you know of another newsletter that might like to carry it besides the one in which you are reading it now, please encourage that organization to contact Rick Hanson at the email address below. Or just email Rick with the contact info and he will approach the organization.

* * *

(Rick Hanson is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 12 and 15. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the first and second authors of *Mother Nurture: A Mother’s Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships*, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)