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How stopping breastfeeding can impact your mental health

It's common for new parents to struggle with their mental health. New parenthood comes with a whole host of challenges, from sleep deprivation and disrupted hormones to lifestyle changes and navigating feeding – all of which can play havoc with your well-being. However, stopping breastfeeding and weaning can lead to some difficult emotions too.

Can stopping breast feeding effect your mental health?

Post-weaning depression is a term used to describe feelings of [depression](#) or [anxiety](#) that can occur after someone stops breastfeeding. You can experience emotional difficulties no matter how long you've been [breastfeeding](#) and whether you are stopping voluntarily or not.

According to a Norwegian study¹ of more than 40,000 breastfeeding women, ceasing nursing – either on purpose or otherwise – can increase the risk of [anxiety](#) and depression. Unsurprisingly, women who were already susceptible to these conditions were at higher risk of mental health problems linked to stopping [breastfeeding](#).

What causes post-weaning depression?

For many, weaning is an emotional adjustment. Although nursing can be extremely challenging, it can be an intimate, bonding experience for a mother and baby.

"You might experience feelings of sadness, [grief](#), [anger](#), anxiety, or emotional instability as you stop to breastfeed your baby," says psychotherapist and [Counselling Directory member Laura Duester](#). "You may feel a sense of loss that your baby is no longer so dependent on you, worry that time is passing too quickly as your child grows, or feel guilty that you're unable to keep meeting your [baby's nutritional needs](#)."

On the other hand, you might have positive emotions, such as joy and relief, as you see your baby being fed by others and enjoy more time and freedom for yourself.

"Mothers often have a wide range of feelings about reducing or stopping breastfeeding, and can end-up feeling alone, exhausted, conflicted, and confused about their experiences," Duester adds.

Additionally, [weaning](#) can be stressful. It can be messy and frustrating - especially when your little one is getting used to new tastes and textures. It can also be stressful to try out [allergens](#) such as nuts.

Hormonal changes

Hormonal changes linked to the cessation of breastfeeding can also affect mental health. The hormone prolactin - responsible for milk production - and oxytocin - the 'love' hormone linked to milk ejection and bonding - play key roles in [breastfeeding](#).

Both of these feel good hormones are connected to how we feel emotionally, contributing to feelings of contentment and love. When breastfeeding ends, our levels of both prolactin and oxytocin drop - which can affect our [mood](#).

Oestrogen levels are generally lower during breastfeeding and increase to pre-pregnancy levels after weaning. Research² shows fluctuations of this hormone can also affect our mood too.

Post-weaning depression symptoms

Everyone experiences post-weaning depression differently. However, common symptoms include feelings of sadness, anxiety, feeling tearful, difficulty concentrating, feelings of loss, and irritability. You may also experience mood swings or lose interest in activities you used to enjoy.

Is post-weaning depression different from postnatal depression?

Although the symptoms are similar, post-weaning depression is different from [postnatal depression](#). Post-weaning depression is specifically linked to the cessation of breastfeeding, but postnatal depression can affect parents at any point after giving birth.

Depression in [pregnancy](#) (antenatal depression) is also common, affecting more than one in 10 women. It's important to note that post-weaning depression doesn't always set in immediately after someone stops breastfeeding.

What can you do if you are struggling with your mental health?

Not everyone struggles with their mental health when stopping breastfeeding, but if you are finding it difficult, it's important to seek support. Although you can't prevent mood problems, there are steps you can take to make the shift away from breastfeeding easier.

Talk to friends, family, and other parents

"Firstly, be honest and open," says Duester. "It is hugely beneficial to share your feelings with a partner, family member or fellow mother. You may even want to book sessions with a [therapist](#) to help explore and process this and the many other challenges that are an inevitable part of parenthood."

[Peer support](#) groups and parent groups can be a good place to chat to other people and reduce feelings of isolation.

Wean gradually and on your terms

It's also important to wean when you feel ready. [Weaning](#) very gradually can mean your hormone levels will change less suddenly. You can reduce your number of feeds or the amount you are pumping over time.

Be kind to yourself

"Try to do mood-boosting activities for yourself, such as socialising, [exercising](#) or being in nature," says Duester. "Find other ways to enjoy time and connect with your baby. This could be by playing together, reading stories, or simply enjoying cuddles."

Speak to a mental health professional

"Give yourself time and space to process feelings, and make sure to seek help from a mental health professional if you're feeling depressed or overwhelmed," adds Duester.

Your GP will be able to assess your needs and advise on the best course of action for you. You can also [self-refer for talking therapy](#) on the NHS. If you're struggling with breastfeeding, you can contact the [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#), [La Leche League](#), or the [National Childbirth Trust \(NCT\)](#) for advice and support.

Further reading

1. [Ystrom: Breastfeeding cessation and symptoms of anxiety and depression: a longitudinal cohort study.](#)
2. [Wharton et al: Neurobiological Underpinnings of the Oestrogen - Mood Relationship.](#)

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Originally Published: 20/11/2023		Document ID: doc_32082

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