

The Essence of Postpartum

A Guide for your first 40 days

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Embracing the Transition to Motherhood

I am deeply honored that you have taken the time to connect with me and explore a deep and ancient wisdom that has somehow been lost to our generation. A woman's spiritual transition into motherhood is as important as her physical recovery from childbirth. Therefore, the postpartum experience must take into account these very real emotional changes.

A woman becoming a mother is experiencing a true shift in identity. This is especially true with her first baby but is of equal importance with her fifth. Navigating this new reality is not something a postpartum woman can do alone. A healthy and empowering transition requires the wisdom and support of others, a concept that has unfortunately been minimized and even forgotten in our modern day world. Even the most intuitive aspects of new motherhood can be confusing and alarming, and new mothers can benefit from the insights and experience of those around them.

"Birth of a Mama: A Postpartum Guide" is meant to address the various emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of the postpartum experience. It is offered to you for free and with love, with the goal of providing you with ideas and guidance for optimizing your postpartum experience and transition into early motherhood.

I want to create a world in which women feel sustained. In which the shift into motherhood is smooth, joyful and full of meaning. In which you feel like you are a member of a tribe. In which you know that you are not alone.

Transitioning Into Motherhood

Many of you have connected with me initially through my page "Birth of a Mama" @birthofamama. "Birth of a Mama" is a twist on the term "Birth of a Mother", first coined by psychologist Daniel N. Stern, an expert on infant development. Stern was a pioneer in considering the world exclusively from the perspective of a baby, a concept that he expanded upon in his books *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* and *Diary of a Baby*. But Stern didn't stop there. He also explored the transition that occurs to a woman following the birth of her first baby, in two fascinating books entitled *The Motherhood Constellation* and *The Birth of a Mother*.

I was 4 weeks postpartum with my first baby when I read *The Birth of a Mother*. The concepts set forth blew me away then and have stayed with me ever since:

"You have always been your mother's daughter, and this relationship, whether good or bad, has always been near the center of your identity."

When you have a child you begin to identify yourself primarily as a mother rather than as a daughter. With this basic change which occurs over a profoundly short period of time you may experience a profound loss as well a wonderful gain."

These few short sentences opened doors to a perspective that I, until that moment, had never even considered. Was it possible to feel both happy and sad about this transition into motherhood? This idea of loss as something natural and expected rather than something pathological was hugely reassuring to me. I suddenly understood that I was not alone. That “profound loss” *could exist* beside “wonderful gain”. That it was all part of a natural and primordial process.

While I myself didn't experience clinical depression in the postpartum period, I did feel sadness; something which I later understood was an almost ubiquitous experience among new mothers. I experienced loss for the woman that I had been and uncertainty about the woman that I would become. This in-between space left me feeling vulnerable and quite different from the brave, risk-taking, task-initiating, world-traveling, independent and professional woman that I had been before giving birth. In fact, up until the week before my daughter was born, I had been travelling the world, presenting to groups numbering in the hundreds. But everything changed with the birth of my daughter and those first few weeks postpartum.

An Identify Shift

My first baby had just been born and I was alone with her. I felt tentative and uncertain, like I was simply *waiting* for something to happen. Waiting for what? I'm not sure. I knew that I wasn't ready to return to where I had been before giving birth and I wasn't sure if I ever would be. I didn't know how to transition to the “new me” and I felt extremely vulnerable existing in this place between who I had been and who I would become. I couldn't have cared less about skinny jeans or returning to work. I didn't like it when people suggested that I let my baby cry – I just wanted to be with her, love her, respond to her, nurture her and carry her. I had never felt so empowered or satisfied **but at the same time** I felt an intense feeling of isolation and helplessness. It was too much for me to do alone. This was truly the first time in my life that I experienced a hunger for support, a profound certainty that I didn't want to be doing this all by myself.

Stern's books had planted in me a seed. I wasn't interested in getting my baby on a fixed schedule. I wasn't trying to get her to sleep more or cry less, or be more flexible so that I could go to the gym or meet a friend. **I didn't want to quickly get back to my old life; I wanted to focus instead on my new life.** How I, as a woman, had changed. How all of those close to me had been transformed

from the birth of this little person that had emerged into the world through my body. How the entire “motherhood constellation” had shifted. It was not just me who was altered. My mother was now a grandmother, my husband a father and my sister an aunt. We were all suddenly different in terms of our identity and status within society.

Intuitively, I began to explore indigenous postpartum practices, reading and learning about different cultural traditions, across the globe, aimed at caring not just for babies, but for new mothers. I found that, unlike in my own world where mothers are encouraged to “get back to themselves”, many cultural traditions actually celebrate and address the intrinsic change that a woman experiences in early motherhood. According to these traditions, the transformation is not merely a temporary state or a matter of coincidence; it is an inherent and important part of the process.

This was the second huge **insight** that I had. Stern had provided me with a framework for understanding the psychological aspects of the “birth of a mother”, yet it was my own research into the various indigenous and cultural practices that allowed me to understand that it was even more primal and profound than that. Birth and the postpartum period were life-altering rituals experienced by women across the world. I was a changed woman not only in my role and responsibilities, but in my very essence. I was, for the first time in my life, a mother. I had just gone through a **rite of passage**.

Rite of Passage

My own personal understanding of “rites of passage” extends back to my teenage years, when I first became familiar with the indigenous traditions and practices of the First People of America and Canada. I had befriended a Lakota family from the Pine Ridge Rez and felt an immediate connection. I spent those first few months watching, then assisting and preparing, and finally participating in Inipi (or “sweat lodge”) ceremonies. Over the years to come I sought out these practices and found myself delving deep into their traditions, participating in more Inipi ceremonies as well as vision quests and plant medicine rituals.

These experiences taught me about the concept of liminal space. During rites of passage there exists a period called “the threshold”, in which the participant exists somewhere between the person he or she was and the person he or she will become. This notion resonated deeply with me and felt identical to my own experience after giving birth, when I realized that I was no longer the person I had been but was not yet the person I would become. This uncertain space would in itself be daunting enough; what made it even more challenging was that I, like

most new mothers, was going through this transition alone, without the support or guidance of a community of women surrounding me.

Just as in birth we talk about the role of the doula to “hold space” and be a supportive presence and container as the birthing mother transitions during labor, so too should there be a supportive community to hold space for the transition into becoming a mother during the postpartum period. My own experience led me to later become a certified childbirth educator, doula and postpartum doula; I saw – and continue to see – a distinct and profound need to hold space for women during rites of passage and transitions like childbirth and becoming a mother.

In researching the many postpartum customs practiced throughout the world, it became clear to me that nowhere, in any other time in history, have new mothers ever been as alone as they are now in the weeks and months following childbirth in most parts of the Western world. Most cultures have very particular beliefs and practices for meeting the physical and emotional needs of a new mother. Yet in our modern world, many of the practices have been lost. A postpartum mother is expected to bounce back quickly and easily transition into her new role. She is expected to return to her pre-birth duties almost immediately and is often criticized or looked down upon if she is unable or unwilling to do so. There is an expectation that she will somehow be able to return to work or her pre-birth physique as though nothing happened. There is an assumption that she will have the physical and emotional wherewithal to simply incorporate her new role as mother to her existing task list. **There is a belief that her new reality can somehow be added to her previous reality, rather than the truth which is that her reality has entirely changed and must be recalibrated. Two new people have been created – the baby is now physically present in the world and the woman is now a mother.**

The postpartum experience must take into consideration this monumental change. New mothers are often offered remedies to help their bodies recover from birth, from soothing sanitary pads to gentle yoga practices. These are obviously important and necessary suggestions, but they do not necessarily address the emotional or spiritual aspects of the transition that has taken place. This transition must be acknowledged, supported and legitimized in a way that is both comprehensive and empowering. A new mother is essentially releasing the woman she once was in favor of the woman she is becoming. This change requires mindfulness on both her part and the part of those around her.

Practical Advice for Navigating Your New Reality

The mental transition to new motherhood can be satisfying and empowering, but also abrupt and disorienting. Many women find that their lives and values have been significantly altered, and they do not know or understand how to approach this new reality. Following the birth of your baby, you may notice that the very things you cared most about, for years, have suddenly taken on new meaning or have become unimportant. This can be confusing and disrupting, and many women feel panicked by the unexpected change.

However, as startling as it might feel, I recommend that you allow yourself the time and space needed to absorb this new experience. Realizing that it is healthy and natural to feel this way can make the process smooth and joyful instead of startling and alarming. Rather than rushing to “get back” to who you were or racing forward into whom you will become, I encourage you to be open to the transition that is naturally occurring and recognize this time for what it is: A rite of passage.

The remedies and practices offered below take into account both the physiological and psychological changes that occur in the days, weeks and months following the birth of a child. Much of what I suggest is based on customs and traditions from throughout the world, adapted to the needs and realities of women who do not live in such communities or tribes. I will list a number of practices that I recommend, although many more ideas can be added to this list. I find it almost impossible to be fully comprehensive in this guide, because the postpartum experience and identity shift can be incredibly nuanced. What I am offering is an overall picture and some key elements to consider. I encourage each woman reading this guide to use it as a starting point for her own particular situation. What is found below is, in many ways, just the tip of the iceberg; however, it is a necessary start.

Rest (“lying in”)

The first, and perhaps most obvious, recommendation is that a postpartum mother rest – a lot. In our modern world, this is often easier said than done. We live in a society that is fast-paced and goal-oriented, and we often forget the healing benefits of simply resting. Resting not only aids in physical recovery. It provides a respite from responsibilities and tasks, giving us the perspective and ability to focus on other, less tangible, elements in our lives.

The length of the postpartum experience is debated – some say it lasts 40 days, others say 40 weeks or even 2 years. However, its starting point is clear – it begins immediately after childbirth, when the baby has entered the world. In many families this occurs when a woman physically births her child, but the

postpartum period exists and is just as relevant for parents whose baby was adopted or born via surrogacy. The physical recovery is one important aspect, but not the only component. For a family adjusting to its new reality, a period of rest, or “lying in”, is crucial for bonding and attachment.

Traditionally, the “lying-in” period extends from birth until about 6 weeks postpartum. During this time, a new mother's primary focus is on nourishing and nurturing her new baby while other people care for *her* so that she may be free to concentrate solely on her new baby and herself. Traditionally this role was filled by other women in the village or tribe; today, it can be done by a postpartum doula, mother or husband/partner. Though most of us today do not have a “tribe” or “village”, we can and must still **rest, rest, rest** in the postpartum period!

Of all the postpartum remedies that I can recommend, rest is the most important. This notion, which might seem extravagant or unrealistic to many “modern” women, is actually a key component of this relatively short yet intense period. It’s not a way for a woman to feel spoiled or pampered; it is a physiological and emotional need. Cultures and traditions around the world have long recognized this necessity and considered it an inherent requirement. Resting in the postpartum period ensures that a woman’s body recovers and strengthens following the intense physical changes of pregnancy and birth. Resting in the postpartum period allows a woman to use her energetic reserves to care for her baby. Resting in the postpartum period safeguards the bonding experience between mother and baby, an element that is crucial for the baby’s development and survival. Resting in the postpartum period allows a woman’s mind and body to recalibrate so that she is physically and emotionally capable of caring for her family. **It is not a nonessential overindulgence – it is a vital requirement.**

Community Support

The necessity of “lying in” naturally brings us to the second, crucial, postpartum remedy – the support of one’s community.

This topic is a passionate one for me, and I feel a particular responsibility to address the notion that a new mother will have an easier transition if she has a “community” to support her. “Community” is not just the physical presence of other people in a new mother’s life. It is the quality and essential nature of this community that makes a difference.

Most new mothers have people surrounding them before and after the birth of their babies; but just the idea that there are other people in their lives is not in itself enough. Many women, up until the birth of their babies, were hard-working professionals espousing the values of dominant society. They were women who

achieved, succeeded, and competed; women who were autonomous, independent and capable. They may have already spent 10 or 15 years “getting ahead”, either academically or professionally, and during this time, they undoubtedly built a strong professional network, created important contacts and maybe even considered a handful of coworkers to be their closest friends.

However – this group of individuals surrounding most women in the western world is not the same as a traditional community.

Perhaps they verbally prepared one another for the negative challenges of motherhood (“Enjoy your sleep now, because you’ll never get to sleep again!”). Perhaps they provided accolades at how quickly other women “bounced back” to their pre-pregnancy bodies (“Wow, you don’t look like you were ever pregnant!”). Perhaps they brought balloons or cute gifts in the days following the birth. But even amongst this presence, **there is a certain depth lacking** – a depth that is a necessary component for the postpartum period, a depth that has all but been lost to most western societies, a depth that is essential for the nourishment, recovery and empowerment of the new mother.

No matter how close these women feel to one another, their loyalty lies in an individualistic society. A society in which a woman is lauded for doing it all: For being career-oriented and a mother, for having a clean house and working overtime, for birthing babies and immediately returning to a fit figure. Within this framework, the change that occurs with new motherhood is celebrated, but not truly embraced. Most of these women were not present in the ceremonies and rites of passage experienced by one another during life-altering transitions. They did not sit by each other’s sides as they experienced joy, mourning and change. The idea of community in most western societies is a superficial one. It promises the physical presence of other individuals, yet offers no real support.

Perhaps it is because of this outlook that postpartum mothers are often encouraged to set boundaries, limiting visitors because visitors (whether family or friends) are often associated with having to give energy rather than receive. Even the best-intentioned mother or mother-in-law can be draining for a new mother if the younger woman feels unsupported or triggered by her presence, or if her inclination is to host rather than receive help. The dynamics of each particular relationship might create a situation in which “help” feel less helpful and more onerous. This is a time when your feelings of warmth, both physical and emotional, are of utmost importance, and you must absolutely be discerning at this time, especially if there are particular family members or coworkers that require you to keep your defenses up.

However, with that in mind, it is equally upsetting to feel all alone and it is vital that you receive support from your network. Rather than limiting all visitors, I suggest that you consider what energy you would like in your home and how you

might go about achieving it. You do not need to border up your windows or shun all callers. Instead, use your mantras, insights, practices, wisdom and spiritual beliefs to remember that this is a time when you will need support. It is entirely possible to receive optimal assistance while filtering out negative influences. We are all vulnerable, we are all wounded, and we all have our stories. You do not need to decide between avoiding people altogether and armoring up in a tidy house, skinny jeans and lipstick. Allow yourself the middle path where you stay in that open heart space of love, oxytocin, tears and vulnerability. Inviting one or two friends or the right mix of family members to be with you in that space will encourage them to open their hearts, as well.

Enlisting Support

New motherhood is challenging because the values that society says make you a “winner”, such as independence and self-sufficiency, are completely antithetical to new motherhood. Once sovereign and autonomous, you are now **crucially dependent** – you can’t even take a shower without someone’s help because your newborn baby doesn’t want to be put down. Your baby is crying, you were up all night feeding him and holding him, your house is a disaster, you are tired, hungry and desperate to bathe – and you can’t do it alone.

In new motherhood, there is no such thing as “self-care” – there is *only* community care. **The only way a woman can care for herself post-birth is if someone other than her cares for her baby during that time.** This may come in the form of the woman’s partner, a paid postpartum doula, nanny, family member or friend, but it is important to have someone who can help you with the baby so you can have moments of care for yourself.

I recommend that you start making lists of everyone with whom you feel close enough to ask for help in the weeks after birth. If you feel inclined to do so, you might find it helpful to compile a “40 day postpartum plan”, much in the same vein as the “birth plan” you probably wrote when you were pregnant. You might remember that the birth plan was a guide to help you navigate uncharted waters during birth; you were not sure what the experience would be like, but you had a compass guiding you towards the ideal picture of your birth, regardless of how it actually unfolded. You included in it ideas and values that seemed important to you, and you made sure that those around you were familiar with the concepts. It was a document outlining your values, and most likely the specific items on the list has an underlying theme – the desire to be treated respectfully; to have a voice and influence in decision making; to be informed and empowered; to have sovereignty over your body; to protect your baby and ensure

him a loving, nurturing and peaceful environment. “The 40 day postpartum plan” can be written with the same values in mind.

When writing out your plan, I encourage you to consider your particular circumstance so that your goals and expectations are founded in reality. A new baby shifts the entire “motherhood constellation”. While you, as the primary caregiver and/or the one who has birthed the child, are undeniably the person most affected by the new baby’s arrival, your husband, mother, grandmother and sister are also irrevocably changed by this new reality. You exist within a family network, no matter how far-removed you might feel from individual family members. Understanding this dynamic can have a significant impact on your postpartum experience. It is important that you keep in mind the extent to which other people in your life are affected by this change – even if only to more accurately design your own support network!

Working With Your Partner

As we discussed, a new baby changes the identity of everyone close to him. Just as you have now become a mother, your partner is becoming a father. It’s true that the one who birthed the baby is recovering physically, but both parents are experiencing major changes that must be considered for the optimal family constellation. In order to truly receive support from your partner, you must also support him or her in their transition.

You and your partner would be wise to discuss fears about role changes after birth. Your partner may say: “I don’t want to be that uncool guy that never sees his friends and doesn’t have sex anymore now that there is a baby.” You might say: “I don’t want to feel helpless and unsexy now that I’ve had a baby.” And then the question arises: What *do* you want? What does your ideal picture of the postpartum experience look like?

With these thoughts in mind, you can together write a plan for making it happen. He might realize: “Ok, you say that you need to take a shower and wash your hair to feel even remotely comfortable in your own skin? So I’ll talk to my coworkers about starting my workday 30 minutes later every day for the next month so you can shower before I leave in the morning.” And you might say: “Ok, I hear that you need to hang out with your friends and play music to feel like you are yourself and stay cool and connected. So I’ll ask my mom or a postpartum doula to come on those nights so that I feel supported too.”

Whatever your particular choices may be, it’s important that you together discuss your individual and shared visions – the person you want to remain, the person you don’t want to become and how your “preferred” partnership looks so that you can successfully support each other in moving towards that vision.

Understanding Your Family

Just as you and your partner have been irrevocably changed from the birth of your child, so too has your immediate family. A new baby can often change the dynamics of an extended family, from a newfound appreciation and understanding of one another to added tensions and misunderstandings. The way that your family adjusts to your new baby has a significant impact on you in these early days, even if only subconsciously, and it's important to understand and acknowledge what is happening between them and you.

One of my favorite tools in my therapeutic practice is the Genogram. It looks four generations back at family members on both sides in order to identify patterns. The patterns that are in need of release are then explored in order to make room for new experiences and ways of being. Some of these patterns have a strong influence on ideas about what a “mother” and “father” should act like and are worth knowing even before the baby is born. Patterns are often unspoken and unacknowledged, yet they carry strong messages and can significantly influence the way we ourselves parent, without us even realizing or understanding the connection.

An initial “act” of non-support regarding a mother's decisions early in her motherhood weakens her trust in herself and has even further-reaching implications, carrying over into other interactions. Looking over patterns and experiences of ancestors and relatives at the time of becoming parents can be enormously enlightening.

For example, a young mother-to-be in my practice faced strong opposition from her family members when she informed them that she was planning on having a homebirth. She was surprised by their reaction and felt overwhelmed by their unsupportive response. Through the Genogram we discovered that her great-grandmother had experienced a late-pregnancy loss and the unspoken message that childbirth is dangerous was passed down in her family, from mother to mother. This newfound understanding allowed her to alter her perception of their behavior, removing the onus of their fear from her own birth process and early days of motherhood. Had she not understood the subconscious fear that had accompanied her family through the last several generations, she might have assumed that her family just didn't trust her, or that her choice of homebirth was truly an irresponsible or wrong one. However, in learning that the situation was more nuanced than that, she was able to separate her own feelings about herself and her new motherhood from the deep-seated doubts and beliefs of her family members.

Although the Genogram addresses family history, there is no need for every member of your family to go into full blown therapy – it is enough for you and your partner to do the work yourselves. The key is bringing awareness and

mindfulness to your own particular situation so that you can trust yourself and your instincts as you enter into this new stage of life. **Your awareness of the past can bring clarity to your present situation and future options, including the kind of support that you can realistically request and a clearer understanding of the expectations and potential triggers within your family network.**

Understanding Your Needs

Understanding the expectations, experiences and needs of your partner and your family can allow you to clarify your own expectations and needs, and accurately pinpoint:

- What you might ask or expect of them;
- Where you would be better off looking elsewhere;
- What reactions might be triggered by your decisions;
- What behaviors might arise and how to handle them.

Once you have gained a heightened awareness of your family's experiences and subconscious messages, you can choose to accept the kind of support that is in alignment with your values and release whatever might feel stifling or unhealthy.

Keep in mind the vision you have of your first few weeks postpartum and consider how you might get the help that you need. Think about your own needs and consider what might arise within your family when you speak these needs.

You might find that your family members would like to be involved more than you had initially thought, or you might learn that they are unwilling or unable to really be there for you. You might decide that their presence is triggering for you and you would like to limit it, or you might learn that it could be healing for both you and them if they are involved in the postpartum period. Everyone is different, so understanding your own particular situation is crucial.

Ask yourself:

- **Who can bring me warming foods during the first week after birth?** Is this something I can ask of my own mother? Or should I ask a friend to coordinate a meal train?
- **What people do I want around me in these early days?** Who do I want to hold my baby while I take a bath, or care for my older children while I am recovering from birth and getting to know my new baby?
- **Who will help with the logistics of the house until I feel capable again?** Can I ask this of a friend or family member? Am I better off hiring a postpartum doula (note: this is not in place of a birth doula)? If I can't

afford a postpartum doula, how might I find a volunteer or an apprenticing doula looking for more practice clients?

- **Who can I turn to for support in my emotional and physical recovery?** Who can help if I have questions or concerns about the baby's health or development? Which friends are acupuncturists, massage practitioners or cranial-sacral therapists? Do I have a list of breastfeeding counselors or lactation consultants in my area? Do I have someone to talk to about possible mastitis, tongue tie or other breast feeding challenges?

Opening Up Your Support Network

You might learn that your current support network is not necessarily conducive to the changes you are experiencing. Some new mothers who are interested in natural childbirth, breastfeeding and co-sleeping might learn that their family and friends are not necessarily familiar, supportive or understanding of these choices. Others might feel like they have no one to turn to with questions or concerns. They may feel judged or criticized when they attempt to discuss things with their family or friends, embarrassed that they do not themselves know the answers, or unsure of what it is exactly that they are asking.

Since the transition into motherhood is a complete shift in identity, it stands to reason that your social circle and support network will naturally need to be adjusted during this new time. If you do not have other mothers in your life from who you feel support, it is a great idea to meet some! You can slowly develop new friends through parent-baby meetups and support groups. Look up all of the resources in your area. You might find the perfect one at the community center across the street or on your local social media group. If you have a particular interest, such as yoga or vegan foods, look for other moms with similar interests. Most towns and cities have Mommy & Me groups and it is quite easy to join online support communities, whether based on locale or interest. Many of these groups can help you stay apprised of events and opportunities to strengthen your community involvement and get the support you seek.

Ideally you can begin to look into these options while you are still pregnant. Pregnancy and birth meetings, online support groups and childbirth education classes are all amazing resources for expecting parents and the friendships made can carry over following the babies' births! While you are all pregnant at the same time, it is likely that you are in different stages of pregnancy or at least not due to give birth the same week. Even before giving birth you can make a plan for supporting one another. You can rotate meal coordination and home visits in the weeks following each woman's birth. You can offer your skills or healing modalities to one another – for example, a massage therapist can give massages, a graphic designer can help create an invitation to the babynaming ceremony,

and a nutritionist can help create menus of warming and healthy foods. Each member of the group can use her own unique skillset and abilities to together create a community support network. Further down the line, you can coordinate watching the other's babies while one takes a class or goes for a walk, so that each mother gets a chance to be alone and refreshed, and is given the opportunity to return the favor. This rotation allows everyone to receive support, and it is also encourages each mother to witness and experience the raw beauty and vulnerability of the early weeks of postpartum. Even for women who are already mothers it can be a tangible reminder of what these early weeks feel like.

But even if you skipped those groups and are only now realizing the need for an extensive support network, it is not too late to find something locally or online. Some of my own best and most fulfilling relationships are with those women and babies I met in my early days of motherhood. Together we learned to navigate new waters and both we and our children benefit from our shared experiences.

Ceremony

The support of your community can be found in both informal and formal ways. One of the more formal ways is an important postpartum tradition practiced in most indigenous cultures: A ceremony surrounding the new child and the new parents, in which the community gathers together to recognize the event that has occurred. Since birth is a rite of passage, it is important to mark it in a way that recognizes the life-changing transition. This spiritual support is as important as the logistical support discussed previously.

Rites of passage should be celebrated. Many women are given a baby shower or blessingway when pregnant, to help them prepare emotionally for the upcoming birth. In the same manner, a ceremony should be held to mark the postpartum period. Mothers who felt noticed and supported throughout pregnancy might suddenly be feeling alone and uncertain, like all those people who were so happy to see her burgeoning belly have somehow disappeared. It is vital that the continuum of support extends to the days, weeks and months following birth. With the birth of her baby, a new mother's hormones have changed, as well as her physique. The glowing energy that many women feel during pregnancy has turned into something else entirely. Whereas weeks earlier she may have felt like mother-nature incarnated, today she may be feeling tentative, depressed, or self-conscious. Postpartum ceremonies allow her to feel celebrated and a part of something bigger.

Even if your own family does not practice postpartum ceremonies, you can create your own and invite friends and family to join you. Understand the benefits and necessity of ceremony and adapt your own to the needs and beliefs of your family

and community. Learn about the different options and see what resonates with you. There are many opportunities for postpartum ceremonies, from ancient traditions to new age creations. You can adopt some of these, or you can tailor-make your own. Many people in the western world are familiar with traditional baptism or brit mila ceremonies, but haven't considered other types of gatherings. Some ideas include, but are certainly not limited to:

Baby naming

The baby naming ceremony is a tradition that has existed for thousands of years across many culture and traditions, as a way of celebrating the birth of a child and officially welcoming them into the community or tribe. The ceremony often takes place only 7-10 days after the birth of the baby, once it is clear that both baby and mother have emerged from the childbirth process intact. Until very recently, pregnancy and childbirth were shrouded in mystery and treated with reverence and caution. Most tribes and cultures understood that birth, by its very nature, represented the potential for both life and death, both literally and figuratively, as it not only marks the transition and transformation in status from unborn to born, but also of maiden to mother. Because of the sheer magnitude of this event, as well as superstitions surrounding birth's sensitive and almost surreal essence, many cultures postponed any celebration and refrained from giving the baby a name until after it was born. The ceremony is also therefore often an act of thanksgiving for both mother and baby's health and vitality – almost a welcoming home ceremony from the tenuous place between life and death.

Burying the umbilical cord or placenta. For centuries traditional wisdom has intuitively honored the umbilical cord and placenta, using them in ceremony and understanding their sacred importance. The burying of these parts is an ultimate expression of the circle of life. It involves taking a physical part of the mother and baby and burying it underground so that it can nourish new life, in the form of plants, flowers or trees. I invite you to read a beautiful children's book entitled *From the Belly Button of the Moon*, by Francisco Alarcon, in which the importance of the umbilical cord is woven into the stories. Even today, modern medical research has validated the age-old wonder surrounding the umbilical cord with new studies showing that not only does the blood supply of the mother flow through the cord to her baby, but that the baby's blood supply flows through the cord into the mothers veins. The symbiotic relationship between the baby and the mother is expressed in the placenta and umbilical cord, which offers nourishment and sustenance throughout the pregnancy. Rather than discarding these sacred parts, you can use ceremony to bury them and recognize their importance.

New mother ceremony. This type of ceremony focuses on the mother's shift in identity, acknowledging the rite of passage that is this transition into motherhood. Similar in intention to a baby shower or blessingway, this ceremony welcomes you into motherhood, completing the circle from pregnancy to postpartum. You can hire a service to create this ceremony for you, or appoint a friend to help coordinate it. This can include many friends or be an intimate affair. Consider inviting other women who have themselves made this transition or will in the near future, including your own mother, sisters, dear friends, and other mothers from your pregnancy circles or classes. Everyone can bring warming foods and join together to celebrate in a way that feels the most *you*. There are many ways that you can bring ritual into these events. Friends can write and then read aloud their hopes and blessings for your baby and your motherhood journey. You yourself can write out your birth story and share aloud with your friends in a circle, and even ask your mother and grandmother to share their birth experiences, perhaps writing all of these accounts in a journal as powerful keepsake of your lineage, something that you can have for yourself and present to your children one day. You can also choose to connect to various elements of nature, again acknowledging the cycle of life. Invite friends to bring drums, read poems, burn incense, smudges or other cleansing herbs, and then do a fire ceremony, writing down all that you would like to release and burning it or a small offering (tobacco or herb), symbolically releasing into the fire what no longer serves you; or have a picnic by a body of water and symbolically incorporate the water element. Depending on the weather you can either fully immerse yourself, as in a ritual bath, or just dangle your feet in the water as a symbolic nod to your rebirth as a mother. Such rituals can be hugely therapeutic as they envelope the postpartum woman in support and acknowledge the journey she has made and the transition she is experiencing. You might consider holding such a ceremony 40 days following the birth of the child, as many cultures and traditions honor that date as a spiritual marking point in the lives of the new mother and new baby.

The concept of ceremony focuses on the monumental transition that has taken place, not just for the baby, but for the mother as well. Giving birth and becoming a mother is a rite of passage. Many remedies focus on physical healing, such as nutritional recipes, therapeutic tinctures and proper yoga postures, but spiritual healing practices are just as important. Incorporating small ceremonial rituals that honor this transitional time can give you the holding environment you deserve, whether through ceremonies created within community or rituals adopted on your own to make your daily experience into something meaningful and sacred.

Rituals

The postpartum period is a sacred time and the reason many women feel a longing or sadness is because modern society isn't honoring it as such. This is a transition that takes time, patience and support. **The postpartum transition can last up to a year** as you release old ways of being and integrate the new. Anything you can do to help the process be meaningful and joyful will benefit you in the short- and long-term.

Just as the community can surround you in ceremony, they can also support you in adopting your own personal rituals. Their involvement is crucial for your self-care – from bringing you food to watching your baby while you bathe.

Warmth

A common characteristic of effective and nourishing postpartum rituals is warmth. The recommendation to keep a new baby warm is intuitive and age-old. New mothers hear so much about keeping our babies warm, making sure they are wearing hats, are swaddled and snug in blankets. These suggestions stem from the idea that a new baby is delicate and fragile, and that the risk of losing body heat could have far-reaching implications. **What we might not know is that the same holds true for new mothers, in the days weeks and months following birth.** Chinese medicine has long recognized this, as have other traditions that encourage offering the new mother warming foods, drinks and baths. These elements of care allow a new mother to maintain heat and hydration and encourage the oxytocin to continue to flow. These are essential components of the post-birth recovery, as the uterine returns to its previous size, as the blood flow diminishes and as breastfeeding becomes established. Staying hydrated is the single most effective action a new mother can take to ensure an abundant milk supply, and while successful lactation can certainly be more nuanced than that, for women who want to and are able to breastfeed, staying hydrated is crucial. Drinking herbal tea blends with nettle, fenugreek, alfalfa and raspberry can be extraordinary helpful, and so can baths infused with different healing herbs and flowers, such as lavender.

Respect

What's more: **Meal, bath and tea times are not just menial tasks. They can themselves be turned into self-care rituals which aid your physiological and psychological recovery and transition.** Consider these times with reverence and respect, as an opportunity to be mindful, breathe deeply and become rooted in the present. If this doesn't seem possible because you have

a crying baby in your arms, ask a friend or family member to come be with the baby so that you can be with yourself. Ensure that you have a meal train coordinated so that you are not left with the task of preparing your own food in these early weeks. Sit down to eat your meal, place a beautiful flower on the table, make a blessing of gratitude before you begin and ingest your food slowly, enjoying every bite. When it's time to take a shower, treat yourself instead to a warming bath, adding herbal blends, flowers, lighting an amber candle, listening to soothing music, burning copal or palo santo and reciting an intention or something you want to release before submerging yourself in under the warm water.

Water

A healing bath can be in your own home, or somewhere out in nature. There is a wonderful book entitled *Spiritual Bathing: Healing Traditions and Rituals from around the World* which discusses bathing rituals for the first year after giving birth, from ancient Sumerian new moon baths to Celtic natural spring ceremonies to the Jewish mikveh. While it feels purifying and reinvigorating to plunge into the ocean, stand under a waterfall or immerse yourself in a running river, a simple warm bath in your own home is easy and accessible. It heals postpartum muscle tension and exhaustion and helps to alleviate the anxiety that often arises after a day spent trying to anticipate the needs of our changing baby. Blood pressure decreases and oxytocin increases, thanks to the heat of the warm water.

Mothers often receive advice about bedtime bathing routines for their babies, but often neglect to remember that the same loving care is good for the mother, as well. Even if you can't do this every try, try for once a week: You can either ask someone to help you or wait until the baby is in bed; then run a warm bath, light a candle, add some fragrant oils and let the warm water heal you

Rebozo

Another warming technique found in cultures throughout the world is the use of a rebozo, or shawl. A rebozo is often offered to a birthing woman to gently assist the descent of her baby through her pelvis, as well as provide counter pressure during contractions as the rhythmic rocking alleviates some pain and provides comfort during strong surges. This same shawl can be used to keep the new mother and baby warm after birth: One or both can be wrapped in it as a soothing blanket; it can be used to wear the baby in a wrap; and it can be bound around the new mother's empty belly intermittently throughout the 40 day period after giving birth to encourage alignment of the uterus within the pelvis.

Many cultures have a birth ceremony that involves wrapping the postpartum mother in several rebozos, from her head to her feet. It is meant to “close”, “wrap” or “gather” the bones, holding the new mother tight and aiding her physical transition back to a non-pregnant woman.

Steam

One more warming and healing remedy that can be helpful in the postpartum period is a vaginal steam bath. This can be done from 6 weeks after birth, or after all the bleeding has stopped, and you might want to first receive permission from your doctor, midwife or healthcare professional. This cleansing and healing therapy uses the simple properties of steam and medicinal herbs to promote increased blood flow and increased oxygen to the pelvic floor area. Moreover, it promotes healing, releases stagnation and tones tissues. Many spas now offer a vaginal steam treatment but it can easily be done at home. In addition to the physical benefits mentioned above, the 20 minutes you spend grounding into your pelvic floor can be a way to reclaim your connection to your feminine center after childbirth.

Sunshine

An often unsung warming remedy is the most accessible of all: Sunshine. The sun offers numerous benefits to both mother and baby. It is a natural source of Vitamin D; exposure activates the pineal gland and regulates the secretion of melatonin, giving even the most exhausted mother an energy boost; it regulates hormones and, as a type of light therapy, is known to ward off the post-baby blues resulting from the endocrine system’s return to a state of homeostasis or balance after childbirth. Sunshine is free, accessible and feels good. You can use your own judgment to determine how much is enough or too much for you and your baby. Early morning or evening hours are a great time to receive the benefits of the sun without the harsh effects of daytime exposure.

Skin-to-skin

Another free and easily accessible warming technique for both mother and baby can be found in the skin-to-skin embrace. In-depth studies and anecdotal evidence have found skin-to-skin to be a powerful antidote to both physiological and psychological issue with mother and baby, from increasing the chances of viability for a premature baby to ensuring a successful breastfeeding relationship and healing postpartum depression. The effectiveness of skin-to-skin is

augmented when the first bath is delayed until at least a few days following the baby's birth; it seems that as in the animal kingdom, the imprinted scents of mother on baby and baby on mother encourage a powerful hormonal interchange. Kissing your baby offers similar benefits; yes, the overpowering instinct to cover your baby in kisses actually serves a biological purpose! When a mother kisses her baby she "samples" the natural pathogens on her baby's face, which then travel back through her lymphatic system - essentially entering her body and creating antibodies for the baby, which he then receives through her breast milk. The natural benefits of skin-to-skin have far-reaching implications on the emotional and physical health of both baby and mother.

Conclusion

The postpartum experience is not just about the physical recovery from childbirth. It is a spiritual transition and a rite of passage. Focusing only on the physiological side ignores the incredible psychological aspects of this period.

It is vital that a postpartum woman allows herself the time and space necessary for this transition into motherhood. Some things she can do for herself but many things she cannot. She needs the support of her family and community to navigate this magical yet tenuous period in her life. Through this support, the woman can embrace her transition to motherhood, recognizing her new reality and identify shift as something positive and empowering. Slowing down in the days and weeks following birth can allow her to respect the process and truly internalize these changes.

Additional Resources for Postpartum Healing

- 1) *Mothering the New Mother*, by Sally Placksin
- 2) *Natural Health After Birth*, Dr. Aviva Romm
- 3) *Healing Your Body Naturally After Childbirth*, by Dr Jolene Brighten MD
- 4) *After the Baby's Birth*, by Robin Lim, Midwife
- 5) *The Postpartum Experience: Reaching out, Reaching In*, By Penelope Waller



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