



Chiropractic Newsletter

Well-Being

Six Things Every New Mother Needs

Borrowed Wisdom from Cultures Where New Moms and Babies Thrive

I was chatting with my friend Ashley about her best friend's wedding. There were parties to organize, dresses to buy, rehearsals to attend, and registries to fill. Ashley was feeling guilty that, due to her busy schedule, she wasn't able to be more helpful to the bride.

I couldn't help but contrast the level of support modern brides expect with the support most new mothers receive: a lot, versus nearly none. Why should this be? Don't get me wrong: I love a wedding, but it's a party. Becoming a mother, on the other hand, is one of the biggest transitions a woman can experience.

The evidence indicates that American and British women are not doing very well with this transition, either. It's estimated that 20 percent of new mothers suffer from postpartum depression, and only 36 percent of American mothers breastfeed successfully. In the U.K., that number is even lower.

According to Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., in her book *Depression in New Mothers*, cultures in which breastfeeding success is nearly universal and postpartum depression is rare share some common traits. They acknowledge postpartum as a unique time, deserving of special recognition and support. They also provide abundant practical and emotional assistance to the new mother during that time.

Culture, not biology, is what makes postpartum so hard for new mothers. Cultural values, and expectations of independence and control, prevent many moms from embracing continual contact with their infants, which is the physiological foundation for the thriving of both mother and baby. The good news is we can change our culture into one that is at least as supportive of new mothers and babies as it is of brides-to-be.

Following Dr. Kendall-Tackett's summary of the traits of healthy postpartum cultures, here are six suggestions.

Drop the idea that the woman is "having a baby", as if she were simply adding something to her life. Embrace the idea that she is becoming a mother: She and her life are changing fundamentally. Mothers are not women with children any more than butterflies are caterpillars with wings.

Drop the imperative to "bounce back" or get "back to normal," and embrace postpartum as a time of transition. Plan for the dissolution of the old life and the disorientation and confusion that come with these transitions by organizing support before the baby is born.

Feed her. Organize a person or a group of people to deliver hot, healthy, homecooked meals to the new family. Being fed is fundamental, fulfilling not just a physical need but an existential one. She will be spending most of her waking hours feeding the baby. It creates a beautiful economy

when her community nurtures her in turn.

Run her house. Allow a person or a group to be responsible for the normal activities of daily living, such as tidying, laundry, and help with older children. Household mess can feel like an indictment: It's too much. I can't keep up. Well, darling, you were never meant to. Only in the last few hundred years have mothers been expected to take care of themselves, their homes, and their new babies all by themselves. With others responsible for running the house—not just “helping” to run, but running it—a new mother can focus on baby and rest.

Run her errands. Infants greatly hamper a new mother's freedom of movement. Babies are unpredictable, and long, unbroken expanses of time will be very hard to find, which makes planning difficult. New babies are also easy to overstimulate and may appear to sleep through errands, only to be fussy or cry the rest of the evening. It's kind to mother and baby to let others do the running around for them for a while.

Sit with her. Every day, in person, on the phone, or video chat, she needs someone to talk to. It's common for a new mother to feel isolated, disoriented, unsure of herself, somewhat displaced, and slightly embarrassed: What's happened to me?, she wonders. I used to be so together. Other mothers who have recently been where she is now can reassure better than anyone that everything is normal, and she and baby are okay.

With a bit of preparation and help—less than it takes to plan a wedding!—new mothers and babies can get the support they need to thrive. They deserve it.

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