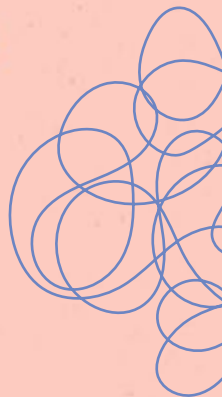
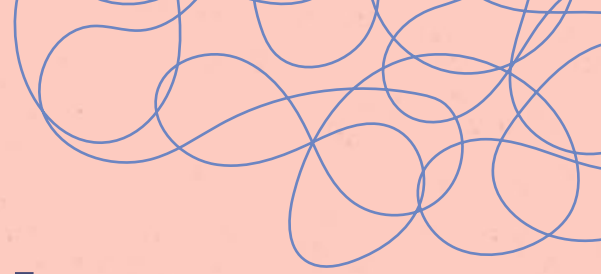
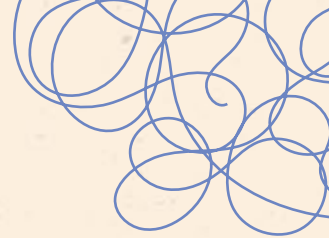


Fearful Flashes

By Julia M. Chiarella-Genoni | Image by Freepik





This is an account of a personal postpartum experience that silenced me for a while. I was quiet because I was scared about what others would think. I never heard about this symptom before and I think a lot of times, as young mothers-to-be, we aren't told about the very difficult and scary side effects that can happen after labour and delivery.

It was my first pregnancy. I was over-the-moon excited and I read as many pregnancy books as I could get my hands on. I learned how big the baby was at each passing month. I learned about how my body was changing. I read about different labours and deliveries. I wrote out a birthing plan, I decorated the baby room with my husband and I prepped my hospital bag to a tee.

The pregnancy was delightful for the most part. I didn't have any issues and saw my doctor each month without any concerns. My sweet baby boy was so comfortable in my tummy that he ended up staying even longer than expected. At 41 weeks, my OB-GYN retired, and I was transferred to another doctor. In a surprising turn of events, upon inspection of my file, my new OB-GYN called me up and announced that I was an expected 42 weeks pregnant due to the size of the baby, and out of concern for some fluid buildup at the last appointment, they wanted me to come in for an induced birth the next day.

I wasn't scared of being induced. I wasn't even nervous about the fluid; I had read about it and felt calm. What

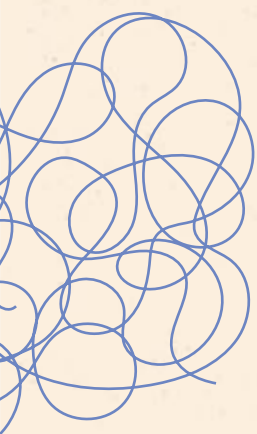
threw me on an emotional roller coaster was the date. I was to be induced exactly nine months after my father passed away. I didn't want to take away any meaning to that date for my mother or my sister. I was torn up, and it was completely out of my control.

Why is this all important to my postpartum experience? Read on.

My labour and delivery were the opposite of my birthing plan. Due to being induced, things moved slowly and I was in labour for about 16 hours. At that point, my doctor said they needed to perform a caesarean birth for the safety of the baby. Even then, I was calm and ready for the next step. My mother had had two caesarean births and she talked me through it. I was fine. After a few hours in recovery, I saw my beautiful, healthy baby boy and my husband and I were forever changed. We were so happy!

For every test, every new situation, every difficult new-mom thing that came my way, I was calm. I didn't have worries; I didn't have stress. My son was a blessing to

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me and my whole family, as we dealt with the loss of my father. He saved us all in a way and brought us so much joy.

What came next tore me apart.

My husband had a business trip to Florida, so we decided we would try our first little family trip together. My son was three months old at the time. I wasn't the best traveller then and I didn't love flying but we took the flight and surprisingly, I wasn't nervous. We settled into our room. The hotel had a swimming pool and the beach was an easy walk away. On the surface, our trip was going so well.

We were getting ready to head to the beach. I had our son in my arms and started walking outside as my husband gathered our things. As I was waiting near the pool, something happened to me. I suddenly saw my son in the pool with his head down. He looked lifeless as he floated in the water. It was a vision, a scary and disturbing vision, but it seemed so real. My son was safe in my arms, but my heart was racing. I had no idea why I 'saw' this, and I didn't want to ever see it again.

But who could I tell? Why did I imagine such a horrific thing? What was wrong with me? These questions swirled in my mind for days and weeks until I told my mother. She had never experienced such a thing, so she wasn't sure what I was feeling or why. Then I decided to tell my new OB-GYN at my next appointment. She listened and then concluded that these were flashes and a normal side effect after giving birth. I didn't receive any more information than that. Truthfully, I didn't continue with the subject because there was a part of me that was embarrassed, and I felt guilty for even seeing these visions.

And the intrusive thoughts kept coming.

My flashes made me feel like a failure. Although my visions were of my child already in danger, and not of me causing harm, I was the mother. So, in this vision placed before me, I had failed to keep my child safe.

But the reality is that flashes like this are absolutely no sign of failure as a mother. If this should happen to you, there are ways to deal with the situation in a healthy and safe way.

What Are Flashes?

Better known as intrusive thoughts, these visions or flashes can occur during pregnancy or the postpartum period. Most intrusive thoughts are exactly that—they intrude on your happy, loving moments with very disturbing visuals of your child in danger. These unwanted visions are no reflection of what you will do or even want to do to your child, but they can be so graphic and surreal that they can cause you to feel overwhelmed, scared and helpless.

What's important to know is that you are not alone. In a study published by BMC Psychiatry, it was found that at least 70% of new mothers experience intrusive thoughts about infant harm, and 50% of new mothers have intrusive thoughts in relation to harming their babies¹.

These flashes can be related to postpartum depression, and something not discussed nearly enough as a PPD symptom. I never knew about intrusive thoughts until I had them myself. And while everything else might be going very well, these flashes are a sign that you are under high stress.

Stress and Intrusive Thoughts

The loss of my father at the very onset of my pregnancy, dealing with my grief throughout the pregnancy and then delivering my son exactly nine months after my father's passing should have been serious red flags for me and my healthcare providers that I would be more likely to experience postpartum depression. And while I was happy to be pregnant and calm in the new motherhood moments, that didn't mean my PPD would not show up in a different place. These intrusive thoughts could very well be correlated with my high stress and grief.

I can't imagine any parent-to-be or new parent that does not have stress. The sudden intense level of responsibility for a human life other than your own is, in itself, one of the most stressful things you can manage. However, it is important to look into your life and see if there are potential triggers for postpartum depression, in order to help you beforehand.

Dealing With Flashes

As mentioned, stress can be a trigger for these flashes to occur, but there are many things you can do to help mitigate them.

As a new parent, it can be hard to carve out time for all the things that are good for our self-care, such as sleep, stress reduction and eating well. However, if you can add these self-care treatments to your life, especially as a new





parent, they will help you in every aspect of parenthood. If these flashes are causing you to feel unsafe or out of control, self-care might not be enough.

It is important that you speak to a postpartum expert. While this symptom may not be talked about socially, the fact is many parents experience it and professionals can help to handle it. If I look back on my own experiences, I should have reached out right away to my healthcare providers. Therapy and maybe even medication through these experiences could have helped me deal with the flashes better.

The visions that I experienced were hurtful and heartless. Knowing that this is common and in no way an indication that you are not going to protect your baby is something I did not know at the time. They caused me immense pain and self-doubt. My hope is that my story will help you if you should experience similar symptoms. **B**

¹ <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-019-2067-x#Sec1>

Think You Might Need Help?

If you are concerned you may be experiencing postpartum depression or anxiety, you should speak to your primary caregiver as soon as possible. You can also request a referral to a mental health professional through Access Mental Health:

1-844-943-1500 (M-F 8am to 5pm)

The following also offer 24/7 telephone support:

- Healthlink: 811
- Alberta Health Services Mental Health Help Line: 1-877-303-2642 (toll-free)
- Calgary Distress Centre: 403-266-1601
- Canadian Mental Health Association Edmonton Distress Line: 780-482-HELP (4357)
- Canadian Mental Health Association Distress Line of Southern Alberta: 403-327-7905

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