



# Pacific Post Partum Support Society

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## Obsessive or Intrusive Thoughts

It is not uncommon for new mothers to experience unwanted intrusive thoughts of harm related to their infant. These thoughts can be about the baby being harmed accidentally or about harming one's infant on purpose. In one study 100% of new mothers reported thoughts of accidental harm coming to their newborn and a little more than 40% of new mothers reported unwanted thoughts about harming their baby on purpose.

For most women these kinds of unwanted, intrusive thoughts are a normal and transient part of early mothering. In a small number of cases the thoughts are more persistent, frequent and distressing and lead women to avoid certain places or activities or repeatedly check on their baby's safety and well-being. In this case the woman is suffering from what is referred to as clinical obsessive compulsive disorder.

The following suggestions can be effective in treating postpartum intrusive thoughts; these suggestions can range from mothers sharing with an understanding support person, as this will often help her to feel relieved and less distressed, to medical interventions such as antidepressant medications. Self-care, including practical and emotional support can make a huge difference for women overall and can result in a diminishing of these distressful, unwanted thoughts. Exploring techniques such as allowing the thoughts to go by and dismissing it as "just another weird thought" rather than judging it as having any importance can be useful. If the thoughts are more distressing or not responding to these interventions other treatments may be necessary. Cognitive-Behavioral therapy is considered by many to be the treatment of choice for obsessive-compulsive disorder. In most studies CBT has been found to be equally or more effective than medication in treating this disorder. However, for women who are having these thoughts quite frequently and if they are seriously affecting their overall ability to function and cope they may need a more aggressive or immediate intervention or approach. In this case antidepressant medication can be very helpful and can offer more immediate relief.

## Causes of Postpartum Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Cognitive behavioural theories of the development of obsessive compulsive disorder are prominent in the literature on this disorder and have received quite a bit of scientific support. These theories propose that unwanted, intrusive thoughts are a common experience. We now know that approximately 90% of the general population experiences unwanted, inappropriate, intrusive thoughts from time to time. In fact, the kinds of thoughts experienced by people in the general population and the kinds of thoughts experienced by people with obsessive-compulsive disorder do NOT differ in their content. They do differ in how often people experience them and how upsetting they are. Because of this some people have hypothesized that common intrusive thoughts develop into clinical obsessions if the person experiencing them interprets the thoughts as indicating that they are a bad, dangerous or immoral person. For example if a new mother interprets her intrusive thoughts as evidence that she is a bad or dangerous parent, she is more likely to have difficulty with the thoughts than the new mothers who interprets the thoughts as strange but unimportant.

Fairbrother, N. & Wood, S. (2006). The mother-infant wellness project: An investigation of violent thoughts amongst new mothers. Final report to the North Shore Health Research Foundation.