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# 'The One Thing That Helped My Postpartum Depression'

"I figured that it was just a part of parenting to feel so isolated, yet have no desire to leave the house."

BY **MARY MCCORMICK AS TOLD TO CARLY BREIT** MAY 16, 2017



When I found out I was pregnant with my first baby, I couldn't have been happier. I couldn't have been more prepared either—or so I thought.

I am a family physician. My husband is one, too. Sleepless nights? No problem. I got through residency with no sleep, so I was sure parenting would be easy. But when my fussy baby couldn't sleep more than two hours at a time, it took a toll on me that I never imagined it would. I was depressed, anxious, and always, always tired. I was not myself.

Truth be told, though, I started feeling like a failure before my first baby was even born. A perfect pregnancy ended with 30 hours of labor and an emergency C-section. As a strong woman and a medical doctor, I felt guilty, like I should have been able to have him naturally.

My emotional health only spiraled from there. My son Graham couldn't eat or sleep well because his slow soft-palate development caused reflux. No swaddling technique or rocking strategy helped him sleep more than two hours at a time—and he'd stay awake for more than an hour every time he woke up. Even when he did sleep, I couldn't. I was constantly checking on him, fearing sudden infant death syndrome or any other trauma I had read about in medical textbooks.

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During the day, I was exhausted to the point of not even remembering what we did the day before. Every night for two months, I couldn't stop the tears from falling down my face as I listened to my baby cry. I had the most supportive husband in the world, helpful parents, a long maternity leave, and an amazing network of friends. I didn't think I was allowed to feel this depression, this desire to not leave my house, these pounding headaches, or this constant anxiety that I wasn't succeeding as a parent.

As my son got older and started to sleep longer, I did, too. My symptoms started to fade with every hour of sleep that I got. After seven months, we realized that Colin slept a lot longer when he was in bed with us, so we decided to start co-sleeping. I felt more awake during the day and I actually wanted to leave the house to see my family and friends.

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When Graham was about 3 years old, we saw the **SNOO Smart Sleeper** in a pop-up ad. The SNOO is a baby bed that boosts sleep for zero to 6-month-olds by imitating the rhythmic sensations babies experience in the womb. We didn't think much about it since our son was too old for it. Plus, we thought, maybe our next baby would be a good sleeper and we wouldn't even need something like that.

I started seeing a psychiatrist when I found out I was pregnant for the second time. I would have told a patient to get help sooner rather than later, so I decided to take my own advice. I breathed a sigh of relief when our son Colin was born full-term, happy, and healthy. But all night, every night, he would scream and cry. Just like with Graham, nothing we did helped him sleep.

I felt hopeless and could feel myself going down the same path of postpartum depression. My exhaustion was preventing me from being the mother I knew I could be and I couldn't go through it all again. I didn't want to look back at photos of Colin as a baby and not remember those moments. That's what happens when I look at some pictures of Graham and it breaks my heart.

I called my therapist crying when my son was about 3 months old. His advice was simple: "Mary, you're not going to get better until you sleep."

My response was simple too: "I can't sleep."

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That's when my husband remembered seeing the **SNOO Smart Sleeper** online. Its website claimed to "take the night shift" by rocking babies to sleep, keeping them safely swaddled the whole time. I watched the soundly sleeping babies on the company's website and thought that was great, but those babies weren't my son. At over \$1,100, it was an investment that I didn't think was worth it. Still, the 30-day free trial tempted us enough to place an order.

When it arrived, it was surprisingly easy to put together. I skeptically inspected the mesh sides, the rocking motion, and the white noise that played. I swaddled Colin in one of the SNOO Sacks, with an inner band around his arms and a mesh sack zipped from his feet to chin. The sack clipped into the SNOO bassinet so he couldn't roll over and suffocate. I realized that even our little escape artist wouldn't be able to get out if he tried. He would be safe inside the SNOO; but I still wasn't convinced it would help him sleep.

We put him in the SNOO, pressed the button to start rocking, and almost immediately, we saw a difference. The rocking motion seemed to perfectly mimic how I would rock him if I were holding him. Within a few days, he was sleeping four hours straight, which was double or triple what he slept in a regular bassinet. When he cried, the rocking got a little faster and the white noise turned into a more soothing, soft sound.

Sometimes, when he wakes up crying, I don't even have to get up to rock him back to sleep. The SNOO does it for me.

Now, Colin wakes up once, maybe twice per night. We're both happier during the day now that we're getting more sleep. I stopped waking up to soothe him every few hours, and I've slept more soundly knowing he can't turn on his stomach and possibly suffocate. Without constant interruption from his little brother crying, Graham started sleeping longer, so he's been happier too. My husband is even sleeping better because of the SNOO's white noise.

But the biggest difference the SNOO made in our family was rescuing me from my second fight with postpartum depression. When combined with regular therapy sessions, a good night's sleep made me a better, more present mother and a happier, healthier person. When I go back to work in May after my 16-week maternity leave, I'm confident the sleep will make me a better doctor, too.

I am not a perfect mom, but since we bought the SNOO, I feel like I can focus on being the best one I can be. And I can enjoy every minute of it.

During each of my experiences with postpartum depression, I thought what I was feeling was normal. I thought it was fine to feel exhausted to the point of not remembering the night before, or feel guilty that I was failing when I couldn't get my son to stop crying. I figured that it was just a part of parenting to feel so isolated, yet have no desire to leave the house. I felt my happy, confident, and life-loving self slipping away, and I couldn't get her back until I started sleeping at night.

It wasn't until I sought help and bought the SNOO that I learned it's okay to feel overwhelmed, but it's not okay to feel hopeless. I've learned that you can never be prepared for parenting, even when you're a family physician. I've learned that if you want to care for your children, you have to care for yourself.

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