



Courage to Care for Me

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/csts/

Tips for Caring for Your Newborn and Yourself

Military Children are our nation's children. Congratulations on the birth of *your* Military Child who enters a special community of caring and courage. These are traditions and values that belong to every member of our military family. Raising children in today's world is not always easy, especially as a military parent faced with the combat deployments of important loved ones.

Courage to Care for Me is a campaign that recognizes the strength and courage involved in being a military parent during times of war often balancing the demands of childcare, employment, social and community



activities. You may ask, 'Why courage'? Courage is a part of our military tradition even beyond the battlefield. Courage is also important when you may have to care for your newborn (and possibly other children) without the help of either your baby's deployed father or your relatives who may live far away.

This *Courage to Care for Me* fact sheet presents common issues that all new parents experience in caring for their newborn. It also

has pointers to help *you* take care of yourself! Your health and relaxation are vital to the growth, health and safety of your precious new child!

What to Expect

Newborns see and learn about the world through your eyes. They are fragile and require patience and gentleness. Caring for a baby is a 24/7 job and when an extra pair of hands isn't around to help, even the calmest mother can become frazzled.

-  Newborns usually spend a lot of time sleeping during the first couple of months.
-  Your baby will naturally develop eating skills, either by bottle or breast feeding. Infants should suck and swallow well, reflexes that improve as they grow.
-  Keep your baby nice and dry. Newborns need to be changed frequently, usually following a feeding.
-  Infants need to be comforted, so hold him and gently soothe him. Don't be afraid of spoiling your newborn by picking him up when he cries. Your baby needs to trust that you are there to care for and love him because this helps him feel safe.
-  Your baby will make cooing sounds and will respond to your voice, even as early as hours after birth. She will recognize your special voice among others, so sing to her and coo back.
-  Your newborn also has the ability to follow objects with her eyes and is only able to see certain colors. Babies prefer human faces to anything else and they especially like sharp contrast like black and white and red in different shapes and patterns.

-  Your newborn will likely smile even when sleeping as early as the first month of life. That smile will be special for *you*, so enjoy and smile back (sometimes new mothers suffer from depression after the birth of a baby that makes it hard to smile; see the section on post-partum depression, a treatable condition, on the back page).
-  Just like adults, infants have different personalities. Some will settle into their new lives with ease. Others may have more difficulty adjusting. They may cry more, have feeding problems or be more sensitive to or distressed by their environments.

Your Needs are Important, too!

Take care of yourself. Eat a well-balanced diet, exercise, get regular medical checkups, and, most importantly, try to get enough sleep! Accept offers from those you trust to baby-sit and take an occasional break. When your child goes to bed, take time for yourself to relax, nap, read a book, listen to music, take a bath, or call a friend. The stress of having a new baby and having the additional worry of a spouse in combat can cause some people to start or increase unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol use, or cigarette smoking. Out of loneliness, spouses of deployed may seek the company of other adults. But, remember not to expose yourself or your child to individuals or environments that compromise your family's health and safety.

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Tips to Help You and Your Baby Settle in Together

 **Be prepared for crying.** It is normal for infants to cry, and they may do so for three hours a day or more. Sometimes your baby may not stop crying, even if you have met all of his needs. If you have concerns about your baby's crying or if you feel like you are losing your patience or becoming frustrated, don't blame yourself, and don't go it alone. Ask for help from family members, friends, member's of your military unit or health care provider. Infants can easily be injured if handled roughly (a sad and often avoidable condition is called Shaken Baby Syndrome or SBS. Please read about this below).

 **Help your baby develop a sleep routine.** Create a sleep time ritual that includes special songs or routines. Keep naptime and bedtime the same, as much as possible, each day. Your baby's naptime should be your naptime.

 **Learn as much about your baby as you can.** Find out which skills your baby will develop and when. Spend time observing the way he looks at the world and how he responds. Is he shy? curious? able to let you know when she is tired or has had enough? Your baby's personality will unfold from the moment of birth.

 **Remember, every child is unique.** Be sure to follow your baby's lead to figure out the best way to comfort, play, and communicate with him. While you may have had experiences with other children, refrain from thinking that your baby will respond in the same way as another. Even brothers and sisters in the same family are different from each other, and these differences can be seen as early as birth.

 **Make family time a priority.** Play with and read to your baby every day. If you have other children plan time each day to spend with them and let them know that you love them equally. With a newborn, don't expect too much from yourself. Housework may need to wait while you take care of your family.

 **Keep your baby's deployed spouse involved.** Even though your baby's father may not be physically present, help him to stay involved in the progress of your infant. Newborns grow and change quickly. Take and send lots of pictures or keep a journal with pictures so that your baby's father gets to know her as well as you do. When he returns home from combat he may need some help feeling comfortable around his newborn. Help make that connection a special one.

 **Maintain your baby's health.** Your family pediatrician needs to get to know your baby too. Well baby checks are an important way for your family doctor to check your baby's health, monitor developmental milestones, screen for common health conditions, and provide vaccinations on time. Even though schedules can be tight, especially during deployment, never miss time with your family pediatrician. Well baby checks keep your baby healthy!

 **When you have questions, ask.** Even when you know your child well, you may still have questions and concerns. Ask your pediatrician when you need advice. Seek a friend or relative to give you help when you are tired, frustrated or just need someone to talk to. It helps to share those special moments, or those difficult days, with another adult.

Important Health Conditions to Know About

Shaken Baby Syndrome

Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS) is the name of injury to an infant's brain caused when someone shakes a baby. An infant's neck muscles are not strong enough to be supportive of the head. During shaking, the brain can hit the inside of the head, causing swelling, bleeding, and pressure in the brain. *Babies should NEVER be shaken.*

Postpartum Depression

About one in 10 new mothers experience postpartum depression that can occur within days after delivery, even a year later. Postpartum depression is different from the baby blues. It lasts longer and can cause feelings of doubt in the mother about herself and her children.

The symptoms of postpartum depression include:

1. Sluggishness
2. Fatigue
3. Exhaustion
4. Feelings of hopelessness or depression
5. Disturbances with appetite and sleep
6. Confusion
7. Uncontrollable crying
8. Lack of interest in the baby
9. Fear of harming the baby or oneself
10. Mood swings – highs and lows

Postpartum depression is treatable and nothing to feel ashamed of. Call or visit your doctor if you have these symptoms.

Visit CourageToCareForMe.org for more information.