

**Removing the Mask ~ Nicole Marr, <http://grudgemom.wordpress.com>
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For lack of a better title, I will borrow that from *The Smiling Mask*. What is *The Smiling Mask*? It's a book about postpartum depression and parenting. I can't say too much more than that as I'm just waiting for my copy to get here for me to read it. More importantly, the smiling mask is what you do when you are faced with postpartum depression, or any depression for that matter. You put on a smile and keep pushing through your day, no matter what is thrown at you. Even if people around you know you are affected by depression, you put on your mask just to be able to function. If you don't put your smiling mask on in the morning, getting out of bed would be just about the hardest thing you've ever done. And if you have a family, a spouse and children, who are depending on you, that mask takes on Atlas-heavy proportions. Notice I said 'spouse?' Postpartum depression doesn't just affect women. Moms may have hormones trying to do them in, but dads have many of the same issues as moms do after a baby is born. The huge change in lifestyle, the sleeplessness, the dependency of the baby and even the dependency of mom contribute to dad's irritability, lack of sense of humor, anxiety, or insomnia – just to name a few effects. The *Journal of Advanced Nursing* published a study in 2004 that found that

During the first postpartum year, the incidence of paternal depression ranged from 1.2% to 25.5% in community samples, and from 24% to 50% among men whose partners were experiencing postpartum depression. Maternal depression was identified as the strongest predictor of paternal depression during the postpartum period.¹

So now that we've established that both men and women can have postpartum depression, what does it mean, and what do we do about it? PPD is scary. I don't mean the "call protective services" kind of scary – although that is a possibility and does happen in some cases. And it's not "call suicide intervention" kind of scary – again a possibility and a reality. But your personal mental state is altered. Thoughts and feelings are in your mind that you don't recognize. You don't understand where they're coming from or why you feel the way you do. It's like you don't know yourself anymore. If you don't know yourself, how is your spouse expected to follow this "change" in you and to keep up, and cover for you or take care of you. And what kind of parent thinks these kinds of thoughts? And why can't I just make them STOP! See? It's scary.

Instead of facing scary, we put on our smiling mask and go about our day. Inside, we're sitting in a corner crying. But on the outside we're greeting friends, and tying kids' shoelaces, and packing spouses' lunches and kissing them goodbye. And no one ever understands what we're going through behind that mask.

Why don't we take off the mask and show them? Why don't we just tell everyone what's going on inside us? Wouldn't that be the obvious solution? But we don't want to be ridiculed or scorned. We don't want it to be blown off and belittled. And if I hear "Suck it up, princess" one more time...

PPD and all other types of depression are so much more prevalent than any study could find. There are people like me who think they can just deal with it themselves. There are people who try to get help and just can't find access to it. Sometimes the help doesn't come fast enough. Mostly though, people who are depressed just get blown off. They are told it's not bad enough, they're "mildly" depressed, it's just the baby blues, or countless other variations of these.

Personally, I think those scorecards need to change. The surveys that you get asked at every well-baby visit, on every anti-depressant's website, in your Cosmo magazine. They've set the depression bar too high, and it needs to be brought back down. It doesn't matter if you're slightly depressed or in a major depressive episode. Your ability to cope with it should be all that matters. If you are overwhelmed by depression, it means you can't handle it yourself anymore. The kind of help you get can vary from person to person. But being overwhelmed means you need help.

Maybe if medical professionals started treating all forms of depression as a debilitating illness, there would be less stigma attached to it. Maybe if they said they could help with the baby blues instead of just telling you to get more support from family and friends. Maybe if dads weren't laughed at for having postpartum depression. Maybe if moms with a little bit of depression weren't shooed out the door to make way for someone else with something else "more important." So many *maybes*.

Next time someone tells you they're a little down, a little sad, a little depressed – ask them if you can hold their mask for a little while. Give them a hug. Tell them you love them. And ask them what you can do.