



Postpartum and the Female Lawyer

By Jamie Milfort (Eliassaint)

It's a boy! It's a girl! These phrases are synonymous with the joy and happiness of childbirth.

They speak to the excitement of a new life but fail to convey the difficulty experienced by the new and current mothers who gave birth to that new and precious life. Excitement is one thing, but society as a whole falls short when it fails to acknowledge the struggle and anxiety experienced by countless women after giving birth.

For many professional women, particularly female lawyers, childbirth is a different type of accomplishment.

It is personal. These women have strived to prove themselves to be talented orators and writers. They have conducted research, drafted motions, engaged in settlements and/or plea negotiations, and tried cases to verdict with poise. They have pushed themselves to prove they are just as competent and deserving as their male counterparts. Day in and day out, they seek to push the envelope in their respective legal fields, in hopes of being promoted and paving the way for other talented female attorneys.

These women are relentless, persistent, and detail-oriented. However, these are the same women who at times

find themselves at an impasse after childbirth. Society, family members, colleagues and the like acknowledge the beauty of childbirth. But who acknowledges the stark reality of both the beauty and pain of childbirth, particularly postpartum?

The term postpartum describes the period after childbirth.¹ During this time, the female body begins the daunting task of healing after enduring pregnancy for nine months. New and current mothers experience pain and exhaustion after experiencing the miracle of childbirth. Within 24 hours, the female body goes from having the highest levels of estrogen and progesterone to having hormone levels drastically decrease to pre-pregnancy levels.²

Days after giving birth, some women experience the postpartum “baby blues.”³ It typically begins two to three days after delivery and tends to last up to two weeks.⁴ The “baby blues” describes the various symptoms mothers experience after giving birth. These symptoms include mood swings, anxiety, sadness, irritability, reduced concentration, loss of appetite, and difficulty sleeping.⁵

However, these symptoms are of greater concern when they last for more than two weeks. At this stage, the symptoms are now characterized as being postpartum depression (PPD). Postpartum depression is a “mental illness that involves the brain and affects [one’s] behavior and physical health”⁶ after childbirth. It is not the colorful imagination of a new or current mother, but a real feeling experienced by 1 in 9 women after childbirth.⁷ PPD is an illness that causes symptoms such as difficulty bonding with one’s baby; withdrawing from family and friends; insomnia; overwhelming fatigue or loss of energy; and intense irritability and anger.⁸ Women also experience feelings of worthlessness, shame, guilt, or inadequacy; a diminished ability to think clearly, concentrate or make decisions; panic attacks; and severe mood swings.⁹

Some women even experience postpartum psychosis. This condition is rare and tends to develop within the first week after childbirth.¹⁰ Women with postpartum psychosis experience confusion and disorientation, hallucinations and delusions, and paranoia, and some may attempt to harm themselves or their newborn baby.¹¹

Oftentimes, the women experiencing these symptoms feel too ashamed and inadequate to share their truth. They have overcome voluminous caseloads, misogynistic work environments, and novel legal issues, but find themselves feeling defeated after childbirth. Childbirth is natural, but this does not excuse the mental, emotional, and physical turmoil new and current mothers often face. It is discouraging and overwhelming. It causes many female lawyers to question their competency and strength. They wonder, “how can I zealously advocate for my client, when I have failed to advocate for myself?”

The truth is, some female attorneys have only known their strength with respect to their legal practice. However,

postpartum is the opportunity for female attorneys to advocate on behalf of themselves and other mothers in legal practice. The postpartum period—whether characterized by the baby blues, PPD, or postpartum psychosis—is a battle won with transparency. With transparency, support systems can be notified and mobilized. With transparency, the legal community can begin to confront the difficulty many female attorneys face after childbirth. With transparency, female attorneys can reclaim who they are and use their voices to evoke change.

Attorneys are called to be advocates for others. And now is the time for female lawyers to advocate for themselves.

Endnotes

1. OASH Office on Women’s Health, *Postpartum Depression* (May 14, 2019), <https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/mental-health-conditions/postpartum-depression#references> (“OASH Office on Women’s Health, Postpartum depression”).
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.*
4. *Id.*
5. *Id.*
6. *Id.*
7. *Id.*
8. *Id.*
9. *Id.*
10. *Id.*
11. *Id.*



Jamie Milfort (Eliassaint) is an associate attorney in the Insurance Fraud Practice Group at Rivkin Radler LLP. Additionally, she serves as the corresponding secretary for the Amistad Long Island Black Bar Association and youth leader at Bethany French Baptist Church. Milfort is a wife to her caring husband, and a mother to her beautiful son.