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# Basic Research Powers the First Medication for Postpartum Depression

May 14, 2024 • Feature Story • *75th Anniversary*

## At a Glance

- Postpartum depression (PPD) is a common mental disorder that many women experience after giving birth.
- Onset of PPD coincides with a dramatic drop in levels of a brain-derived steroid (neurosteroid) known as allopregnanolone.
- Decades of research supported by NIMH illuminated the role of neurosteroids like allopregnanolone in mental illnesses.
- In 2019, brexanolone—a medication that acts by mimicking allopregnanolone—became the first approved drug to treat PPD.
- Able to significantly and rapidly reduce PPD symptoms, brexanolone was a major leap forward in depression treatment.

Joshua A. Gordon, M.D., Ph.D., a practicing psychiatrist at the time, would never forget the call he received one night from a distraught mother.

“She was plagued with a deep, inescapable hopelessness—so depressed she was afraid she was going to hurt her month-old daughter. I helped her get to the hospital, where she spent the next 2 months in an in-patient program trying every available treatment to recover,” said Dr. Gordon, now the Director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).



*Credit: Prostock-Studio.*

Unfortunately, this experience is not uncommon among women and other postpartum people who may feel intense sadness, anxiety, and loss of interest after giving birth. These symptoms can be signs of a clinical disorder known as [postpartum depression \(PPD\)](#). Unlike the “baby blues” or feelings of sadness many new mothers experience in the days after delivery, PPD is more intense and long-lasting, with damaging impacts on health and well-being.

## More than the blues: Impacts of PPD on women's mental health

[Depression](#) is a common but serious mood disorder. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), rates of depression are high—and rising—among postpartum women. Using

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