



When It's Impossible to Fully Prepare

A Case Study of Monica





When It's Impossible to Fully Prepare

A Case Study of Monica

AT A GLANCE

CHALLENGES

- Lack of attention to birthing and non-birthing partner mental health
- Lack of investment in supports

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide education on realistic postpartum expectations, better access to mental health care, and partner-inclusive support programs
- Reduce societal stigma

ABOUT THE STUDY

This research is based on in-depth interviews with 17 caregivers across the U.S. who experienced perinatal mood and anxiety disorders.

Monica's Story

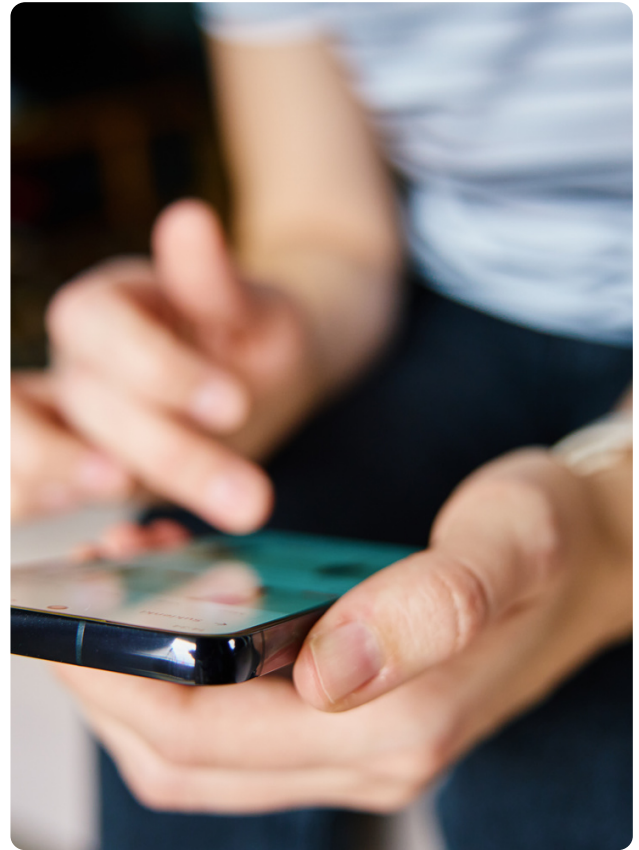
Monica entered motherhood with high expectations, thinking she had prepared thoroughly through prenatal classes and consultations. However, once her baby arrived, she quickly realized the focus was primarily on the baby, with minimal discussion about her own postpartum needs. ***“Everything is about the baby; no one tells you what you need,”*** she recalls.

Monica participated in our recent study on perinatal mental health and brought a wealth of insight into the experiences of caregivers who are also students. With her permission, we highlight her story.

“I thought I had prepared enough. I researched. I planned. And still, I was completely blindsided by how hard it was.”

Monica gave birth in December and was immediately confronted with challenges, including a lingering virus and severe breastfeeding difficulties due to her son's lip and tongue tie. The physical pain of nursing, compounded by her illness and lack of immediate family support, left her feeling isolated and overwhelmed. ***"I felt guilty for struggling when I thought I should have been grateful,"*** she admits. ***"I thought I would instantly bond with my baby. But two weeks in, I told my husband, 'I don't feel anything for him.' That was heartbreaking to admit."***

Her emotional struggles were further compounded by social media, which presented an idealized version of motherhood. ***"Seeing my friends out enjoying life while I was awake at 2 a.m., exhausted and frustrated, made me question everything,"*** she reflects. These feelings of isolation and guilt are common among new mothers and can contribute to postpartum anxiety and depression (Slomian et al., 2019). Sometimes it was hard not to compare her situation with others, even her close friends. ***"My best friend had a midwife visit her every week postpartum. In Germany, they had a system in place. And here I was, completely on my own, struggling to figure things out."***



"I remember visiting my best friend in Germany when she was two weeks postpartum. We were out at dinner, taking the train."

She was standing on the platform breastfeeding her baby with no problem. I had to have a pillow, the perfect angle, the perfect setup. I kept thinking, why is this so hard for me?"

Supports & Gaps

With her second child, born during the COVID-19 pandemic, Monica took a proactive approach by ensuring family support and having open conversations with her husband about expectations. ***“I knew I needed my mom there, and it made all the difference,”*** she says. This experience highlighted the importance of a strong postpartum support system, leading to a far more positive and fulfilling transition. It also helped her combat isolation and the temptation to compare her journey to others’. Studies suggest that early and consistent postpartum support can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and improve maternal mental health (Letourneau et al., 2019).

Therapy also greatly supported Monica the second time around. ***“I saw a therapist later who said, ‘Everyone has an idea of what their child is going to look like, how they’re going to feel.’ But when reality is different, you have to let yourself mourn that.”***

Finally her husband, initially unaware of the extent of her struggles, became a more involved and supportive figure the second time around. ***“Having open discussions helped us set realistic expectations and share the workload more effectively,”*** she notes.

“I thought things had to be done a certain way. I had this idea that I was going to breastfeed, that it was going to be a natural experience. And then when I struggled, I felt like I was failing.”

Monica's return to work after 16 weeks of paid maternity leave highlighted the need for more flexible workplace policies. While she acknowledges her privilege compared to many U.S. mothers, she believes longer parental leave and mental health resources should be standard. ***“It felt like just as I was getting used to things, I had to go back,”*** she explains.



Future Directions

"I did all the classes, the birth class, the postpartum prep. I thought I was ready. But nothing actually prepared me for the reality of it." The case of Monica highlights the emotional strain of postpartum recovery and the need for healthcare systems to provide comprehensive care for mothers.

Further, it emphasizes the need for improved postpartum education and support systems that address not just the baby's needs but the mother's well-being as well. Therapy, social supports, and systemic supports (e.g., longer paid workplace leave) can play a large role in improving caregiver and child outcomes.

Dedicating more funding for all caregivers, regardless of their resources or level of 'preparation,' could:

- Enhance maternal well-being
- Foster stronger family dynamics and combat loneliness and isolation
- Support working professionals' transition back to work and improve their workplace productivity

"We need to normalize talking about postpartum struggles and providing practical support options."

The Bottom Line

By investing in comprehensive support systems, we can combat caregiver guilt, isolation, and grief, and transform the perinatal period into a positive and fulfilling transition.

References:

Letourneau, N., Dennis, C. L., Cosic, N., & Lussier, M. E. (2019). The effect of perinatal depression treatment for mothers on parenting and child development: A systematic review. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 23(5), 725-737. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-018-2566-y>

Slomian, J., Honvo, G., Emonts, P., Reginster, J.-Y., & Bruyère, O. (2019). Consequences of maternal postpartum depression: A systematic review of maternal and infant outcomes. *Women's Health*, 15, 1745506519844044. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745506519844044>

About Nested

At Nested, we're committed to advancing family well-being through rigorous, impactful research. As a specialized 501(c)(3) nonprofit institute with deep expertise in child development, perinatal mental health, and parenting, **we are accelerating the research-to-action pipeline.**

Methodology

This case study is part of *Missed Screenings, Missed Support*, a national study on perinatal mental health. As part of the research, we conducted one-on-one interviews with caregivers across the United States, each lasting up to two hours. These conversations explored their personal experiences with perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, capturing the challenges, support systems, and moments that shaped their journeys.

All names used in this case study are pseudonyms. Any identifying information has also been changed to protect caregiver privacy.



This study was made possible by the generous support of our founding partners, who share our commitment to improving family well-being.

