

branches & blossoms

Where strength branches out and joy blooms

CCYSB YOUTH SUICIDE INTERVENTION & PREVENTION SERVICES

JUNE 2026

The Fourth Trimester: What No One Tells You About the First 12 Weeks

Pregnancy often comes with preparation. There are books to read, appointments to attend, nurseries to organize, and baby registries to complete. Friends and family may offer advice about labor, delivery, and newborn care. Yet despite all the planning that goes into welcoming a baby, many parents report feeling unprepared for what comes after birth.

The period immediately following childbirth is often referred to as the Fourth Trimester—the first 12 weeks postpartum. During this time, a newborn is adjusting to life outside the womb while the parent is recovering physically, adapting emotionally, and navigating one of the most significant life transitions they may ever experience.

For many families, the fourth trimester is beautiful, exhausting, rewarding, overwhelming, joyful, lonely, and transformative—all at the same time.

The reality is that while pregnancy receives considerable attention, postpartum recovery often does not. Understanding what to expect during the fourth trimester can help reduce shame, normalize challenges, and encourage families to seek support when needed.

Recovery Is More Than Physical Healing

When people think about postpartum recovery, they often focus on physical healing. Whether someone experienced a vaginal delivery, cesarean birth, or a complicated labor, the body requires time to recover.

Common physical experiences during the fourth trimester may include:

- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Vaginal bleeding and discharge
- Pelvic floor discomfort
- Breast and nipple soreness
- Changes in appetite
- Night sweats
- Hormonal fluctuations
- Body aches and muscle tension
- Healing from surgical procedures or birth injuries

These changes are significant. Yet many parents feel pressure to “bounce back” physically long before their bodies are ready. The truth is that recovery is not a race. The body has accomplished something extraordinary and deserves time, rest, and compassion.

What's Inside:

**The Fourth Trimester:
What No One Tells You
About the First 12 Weeks**

**Helpline & Crisis
Resources**



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Prevention @ CCYSB !

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The Fourth Trimester: What No One Tells You About the First 12 Weeks

The Emotional Reality No One Talks About

Many parents anticipate feeling tired after birth. Fewer anticipate the emotional intensity that can accompany the transition. The arrival of a baby often brings tremendous joy and gratitude. At the same time, it can also bring fear, uncertainty, grief, loneliness, frustration, and self-doubt.

These emotions do not cancel each other out. The fourth trimester is often an exercise in holding multiple truths at once -

- You can be deeply in love with your baby and still miss your old routine.
- You can feel grateful and overwhelmed.
- You can feel excited and anxious.
- You can feel connected and lonely.

Unfortunately, societal messages about parenthood sometimes suggest that these emotions should not coexist. Parents may feel guilty for struggling when they believe they should simply feel happy. In reality, emotional complexity is a normal part of adjustment.

Sleep Deprivation Changes Everything

One of the most underestimated aspects of the fourth trimester is sleep deprivation. Newborn sleep patterns are biologically designed around frequent feeding and caregiving needs. As a result, many parents sleep in short, fragmented stretches rather than long, restorative periods.

Research consistently shows that interrupted sleep affects:

- Mood
- Concentration
- Memory
- Emotional regulation
- Patience
- Stress tolerance

Many parents find themselves crying more easily, becoming more irritable, or feeling emotionally overwhelmed after several nights of disrupted sleep. This does not mean they are failing. It means they are exhausted. While perfect sleep is unrealistic during the newborn period, protecting opportunities for rest whenever possible can have a significant impact on mental health.

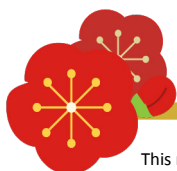
When Expectations Meet Reality

Many parents enter the postpartum period with expectations about what life will look like after baby arrives. Perhaps they imagine visitors stopping by regularly to help. Maybe they expect breastfeeding to feel natural and intuitive. Perhaps they assume they will quickly settle into a predictable routine.

For some families, those expectations align with reality. For many others, they do not. Visitors may arrive wanting to hold the baby rather than help with chores. Feeding challenges may emerge unexpectedly. The “village” people often talk about may feel smaller than anticipated.

The gap between expectation and reality can create disappointment, grief, and self-criticism. Rather than asking, “Why am I struggling?” it may be more helpful to ask, “Were my expectations realistic given what I am experiencing?” Often, the issue is not personal inadequacy—it is a mismatch between expectations and reality.

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Helplines & Crisis Resources

This newsletter is for educational and supportive purposes, not a substitute for mental health diagnosis or treatment. If you experience suicidal thoughts, thoughts of harming your baby, or severe symptoms, please contact emergency services, go to the nearest emergency department, or call 988 / crisis line immediately.

**National Suicide &
Crisis Lifeline**

Call or Text

988

Chat: <https://988lifeline.org/chat>

**National Maternal Mental
Health Hotline**

Call or Text

1-833-TLCMAMA

(1-833-852-6262)

**Postpartum Support
International (PSI)**

www.postpartum.net

1-800-4PPD (4773)

The Fourth Trimester

The Invisible Shift in Identity

One of the most profound changes of the fourth trimester is one that cannot be seen. Becoming a parent often changes how people view themselves, their relationships, their priorities, and their future. Questions may arise such as:

- Who am I now?
- What parts of myself feel different?
- How has my relationship changed?
- How do I balance my own needs with my baby's needs?
- Will I ever feel like myself again?

These questions are normal. Parenthood is not simply adding a baby to your life. It often involves restructuring your understanding of yourself. This process takes time. Just as a newborn is adjusting to a new world, parents are adjusting to a new version of themselves.

Relationships Often Change

The fourth trimester can place strain on even strong relationships. Partners may find themselves communicating less effectively due to exhaustion. Family members may have differing opinions about parenting decisions. Friendships may shift as schedules and priorities change. Parents sometimes report feeling disconnected from loved ones while simultaneously needing support more than ever. These changes can feel unsettling. However, relationship challenges during the fourth trimester are often less about a lack of love and more about the extraordinary demands everyone is trying to navigate. Frequent communication, realistic expectations, and asking directly for support can help reduce misunderstandings.

Baby Blues Versus Something More

Many new parents experience what are commonly called the “baby blues.” Symptoms may include:

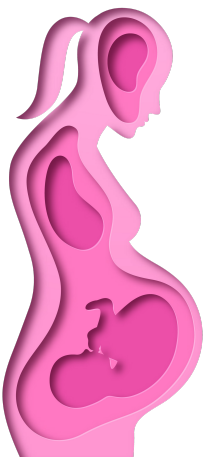
- Tearfulness
- Emotional sensitivity
- Mood fluctuations
- Feeling overwhelmed

These experiences typically begin within the first few days after birth and improve within two weeks. However, if symptoms persist, worsen, or significantly interfere with functioning, it may indicate a perinatal mental health condition such as postpartum depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, or another mood disorder. Warning signs that deserve attention include:

- Persistent sadness
- Excessive worry
- Panic symptoms
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Difficulty bonding with the baby
- Significant withdrawal from others
- Intrusive thoughts that cause distress
- Thoughts of self-harm

Seeking help is not a sign of weakness. It is an act of care for both parent and baby.

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Did You Know?

The term “Fourth Trimester” was coined to describe the first 12 weeks after birth because newborns are still undergoing rapid development that would have occurred in the womb. During this same period, parents are recovering physically, adjusting emotionally, and adapting to major changes in sleep, relationships, and daily life. Research consistently shows that strong social support during the postpartum period is one of the most protective factors for maternal mental health.



The Fourth Trimester

Preparing for the Fourth Trimester Before Birth

One of the most effective ways to support postpartum well-being is to prepare before the baby arrives. Consider creating a Fourth Trimester Support Plan that includes:

Practical Support

- Who can help with meals?
- Who can assist with household tasks?
- Who can help with older children?

Emotional Support

- Who can provide nonjudgmental listening?
- Who can check in regularly?

Professional Support

- Mental health providers
- Lactation consultants
- Medical providers
- Support groups

Rest Protection

- How will sleep opportunities be protected?
- How will responsibilities be shared?

Planning for postpartum is just as important as planning for birth.

A Final Reflection

The fourth trimester is not a test to pass.
It is a season of recovery, adjustment, learning, and growth.
You do not have to enjoy every moment to love your baby.
You do not have to do everything perfectly to be a good parent.
You do not have to struggle alone.

If this season feels harder than expected, you are not failing.
You are navigating one of life's most significant transitions.
Give yourself the same compassion you would offer a friend.
Healing takes time.
Adjustment takes time.
And support was never meant to be optional.
The fourth trimester is not simply about caring for a baby—
it is also about caring for the person becoming a parent.



Have I ...	
☐	Accepted help when offered?
☐	Eaten & hydrated today?
☐	Had a meaningful conversation with another adult this week?
☐	Identified someone I can call when I'm struggling?
☐	Rested, even briefly, when possible?
☐	Shared honestly about how I'm doing?
☐	Scheduled follow-up medical & mental health care if needed?



PEARL will be a rolling admission group held at the Carroll County Youth Service Bureau every Wednesday 10 – 11 am. A licensed therapist will lead the group with the support of a peer support specialist. Medicaid and private insurance accepted. Referrals can be placed by contacting the Referral Coordinator at 410.848.2500, option 0. For more information on PEARL, please contact Bobby Jarrett, LCPC at 443.244.8657 or rjarrett@ccysb.org.