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Postnuptial Depression: What Happens the Day After

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I got married in August, and - I'll admit it - I'm still slightly obsessed with reliving my wedding day. But I don't think my friends want to reminisce anymore about the miraculously sunny hillside ceremony or the super rockin' dance party at the reception. I can't really turn to my husband either, the only other person as emotionally invested in my wedding as I am, because he's 9,000 miles away in Vietnam. After the big to-do, which we spent a year planning long-distance, he's back living and working in Saigon and I'm back in Manhattan - living with my grandmother. Talk about a letdown.

It wasn't until I received an e-mail from a friend that I realized there was a name for what I was going through. It read, "Hope you're not too deep into the wedding blues (the depression you get after the wedding is over, that no one really tells you about)." Bingo. ([See the Year in Health, from A to Z.](#))

Postnuptial depression may not be a clinical diagnosis, but it has entered the lexicon of marriage in the past few years, and newly hitched couples will tell you it's real. The blues typically hit early in married life, psychiatrists say, as newlyweds begin recognizing that expectations of how their partner or relationship will change postwedding are unrealistic. Worse, once the Big Day has come and gone, couples are forced to step out of their much-cherished and often long-lived "bride and groom" spotlight and just get on with real life.

Dr. Michelle Gannon, a San Francisco psychologist who conducts Marriage Prep 101, a weekend workshop, with her husband Patrick, says there's been an uptick lately in the number of recently married couples who enroll to deal with their postwedding doldrums. Newlyweds often [blog about it](#), while brides-to-be fret over the anticipation of it on websites like [TheKnot.com](#). Therapists say most people experience at least some minor disappointment as they settle into a new marriage, but 5% to 10% of newlyweds suffer strong enough remorse, sadness or frustration to prompt them to seek professional counseling.

Emily Summerhays, 30, felt regret immediately after her 2002 wedding ceremony. She found herself crying even as she said goodbye to guests at the reception. "It was sort of buyer's remorse - 'What did I just do? This is really permanent,' " she recalls. That feeling of losing one's selfhood can be overwhelming, especially when it's coupled with a sense of duty to do everything as a pair, says Dr. Jane Greer, a marriage and family therapist based in New York City who has taught a seminar called "Are You Ready for Commitment?" Greer says: "It's a question of how prepared you are to become 'we.' " ([See pictures of the busiest wedding day in history.](#))

For months into her marriage, Summerhays remained in a funk. "There was a lot of me being sad and sullen, wishing I could be married and somehow also be single," she says. She felt afraid of sending the wrong message to her new husband. Summerhays recalls thinking, Will he think I don't love him enough if I don't want to snuggle with him all night or if I leave him for the weekend? And she felt trapped in her own melancholy, feeling ashamed that her new marriage wasn't living up to the fairy tale. Dr. Terry Eagan, medical director of the Moonview Sanctuary in Santa Monica, Calif., calls postnuptial depression the secret sadness - women who experience it are often too embarrassed to tell anyone, while men are simply less open with their feelings to begin with. "A lot of my friends had experienced it," Summerhays says. "It was just hard for us to admit that we were happy in our marriages and yet so indescribably sad on some level."

The so-called honeymoon period, say psychologists, really isn't. But so many couples buy into the myth that when they start arguing about sex, money or time - issues that all married couples battle over - it can seem catastrophic. Gannon finds herself correcting patients all the time. "Where did you get the idea that you weren't supposed to fight?" she says. "You are. It's normal." It's also normal to remain independent and to be responsible for your own happiness. "It's unreasonable to assume your partner is going to be everything to you," says Eagan.

Even couples who cohabit before marriage and who have presumably tempered their expectations and reconciled their petty differences are not immune to the day-after blues. "People who have been living together think they're going to feel something different once they're married," says Gannon. But there's no magical transformation that comes with signing a marriage certificate. In fact, if anything changes, it might be the couples' biology - which may only worsen postwedding blues. When people are newly in love - or feel a rekindling of love just after getting engaged - their bodies release more of the feel-good hormones dopamine and oxytocin, which stimulate bonding. But as the relationship wears on, the levels of those hormones drop. That accounts in part for the fact that "in the transition from dating sex to married sex, the interest, frequency and effort goes down," says Gannon. But having less sex precisely when couples think they should be having more is understandably stressful.

For many couples, it's not about sex or arguing; despite good sex and open communication, they still feel adrift. The problem may be that after months consumed by wedding preparations and feeling like the center of attention, the sudden shift back to everyday life can be a shock. "I put a lot of time and effort into the wedding-planning process," says Erin Hastings, 28, who got married in 2006 after an 18-month engagement. "Where do you redirect your energy once it's over?"

The answer, the Hastings learned, is to direct that energy on themselves and their marriage. "We have a date night every week, without fail," Erin says. Taking time to be with your partner and to think about each other is always important. Ideally before the wedding, Greer says, couples should take a step back and remind themselves of at least two things: the reasons their partner is the right person for them, and that their beloved's annoying little habits aren't going to disappear at "I do."

After the vows, to defeat the postnuptial blues, doctors say, couples should get adequate rest and exercise; communicate constantly; focus on the benefits of marriage, like having a built-in support system; and start thinking about the future in terms of family or finance. Women should stop thinking of themselves as "the bride" and throw out those wedding magazines, then plan social events for after the honeymoon, so they have other parties to look forward to.

Since my husband and I are half a world apart, all I can do for now is rest and exercise, and learn to relinquish the spotlight - to one of my bridesmaids who just got engaged. It'll be worth it, as I know the high point of her wedding roller coaster will be another rockin' dance party.