

Case Study #6. PPD with suicidal intent

The patient is a 36-year-old woman who delivered her third child four months ago. She reports that she had depressive symptoms and struggled for some time after the birth of her second child, but never sought treatment. In the 2 years between her second and third child, she reports that she never completely recovered, and continued to be mildly depressed, including during her most recent pregnancy.

Her husband accompanies her to the appointment, but she requests that he not be present during the exam. Her Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) score is 18, and she indicates on question #10 that she has had some thoughts about harming herself. When you ask about these thoughts, she quickly states that “they are just thoughts, nothing more.” On further questioning, however, she reveals that the thoughts have been increasing in intensity, and she has had specific thoughts about sitting in her car with the engine running while in her garage. She denies that she would act on these thoughts, and further states that she would never do so “because it would hurt my children.” When discussing these issues, she is very tearful. She concludes the interview by asking you “not to tell anyone else about this.”

Questions

1. What should be your next step in evaluating this woman?

Encourage the woman to allow her husband to join them for the remainder of the exam and to share her thoughts and feelings with him. Explain that it is critical that her husband know what is going on so that he may help her. If the woman agrees, tell her husband that she has been having some fleeting suicidal thoughts and, while she says she wouldn't act on them, you prefer to have her undergo a psychiatric evaluation. He should also be aware of all emergency procedures. Explain to him that until she is evaluated, she should not be left alone.

2. What questions should you ask her husband?

What is her behavior at home like? Has she mentioned suicide? Is her behavior unusual? Are there any indications that she may harm herself or others, including the children?

3. If her husband indicates that she has made suicidal statements and that he is concerned that she will attempt suicide, what additional steps should you take?

Arrange for immediate transfer to the ER for psychiatric evaluation. Contact the ER to which she is sent to provide them with the information you have obtained.

[Close Responses](#)