



Looking after the mental health of you and your baby



Public Health
Agency

Project supported by the PHA

AWARE
OVERCOMING DEPRESSION.
CHANGING LIVES.



This booklet has been produced by AWARE NI with the support of the Public Health Agency and complements AWARE NI's Mood Matters Parent and Baby Programme, although it may also be used as a self-help resource.

It can help you enjoy pregnancy and parenthood by giving you information on how to look after your mental health and that of your baby. It will also help you recognise signs and symptoms of poor mental health and make you aware of sources of help.



What do we mean by mental health?

Mental Health is....

How healthy our mind is and how well it works.

It's about our thoughts and our feelings and how we deal with the ups and downs of life.



Good mental health is just as important as physical health.

It means feeling positive about yourself, being able to cope with everyday pressures and being able to form and maintain relationships.



Sometimes we use the word 'resilience' when we describe the ability to be able to deal with life's problems and bounce back when we experience setbacks.

Pregnancy/parenthood and mental health

For the vast majority of parents, pregnancy and parenthood is a time of great happiness and contentment, especially if it is a first child or they have been trying to have a baby for some time. There are also usually feelings of anticipation and hope for the future.

There are about 23,500 babies born in Northern Ireland every year, and research shows that most mothers go through pregnancy, childbirth and the year that follows without any major mental health problems. Similarly, the vast majority of fathers cope well and enjoy their experience of parenthood.

However, it can also be a worrying and stressful time, which will affect all parents to some extent and may lead to some experiencing mental health problems such as low mood or anxiety or even a mental illness such as depression.

*It can bring a lot
of feelings such as:*

happiness

anticipation

shock

relief

learning

anxiety

feeling
overwhelmed

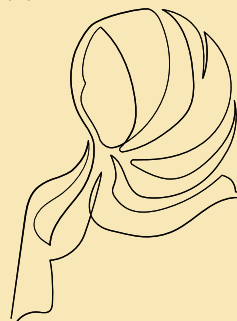
contentment

Mental health in pregnancy and parenthood

There are many situations and events that can impact on mental wellbeing before, during and after pregnancy and these include:

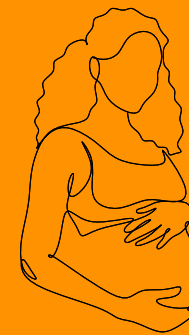
Generally:

Difficult relationships, domestic violence, money worries, problems at work, health problems, bereavement, lack of support etc.



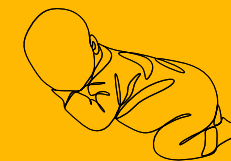
During Pregnancy:

Worrying about baby, hormonal changes, feeling unwell, feeling tired, body changes, complications at birth etc.



After Pregnancy:

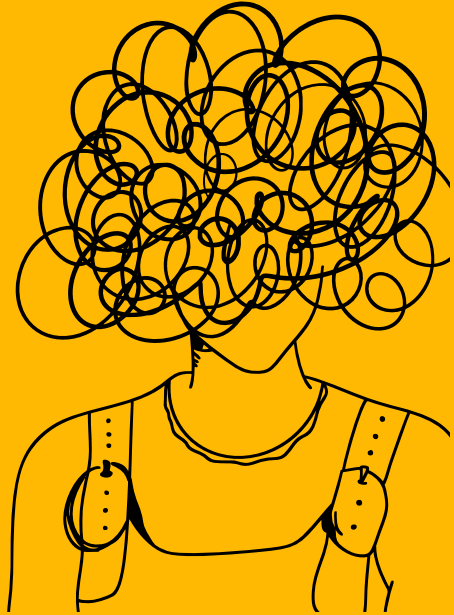
Lack of sleep, baby's health, adapting to new routine and responsibility, childcare issues, impact on relationship with partner, loss of contact with friends, worrying about return to work etc.



What is stress?

Stress is.... when we think the demands placed upon us exceed our ability to cope.

Anxiety UK



It is no surprise that given all the challenges involved in pregnancy and parenthood, even the best prepared and supported parents will experience symptoms of stress and anxiety at some stage. These feelings are normal and some stress can actually be good for you as it can motivate you and help you focus on what you are doing. It can also increase your awareness of danger which helps protect you and your baby.

However, in the longer term, stress can be harmful and impact adversely on your mental wellbeing so it is important to know the signs and symptoms early and have ways of dealing with it.

Symptoms of *Stress*

THINKING

- I won't be/I'm not a good parent
- I won't be able to cope
- Something is going to go wrong
- I can't do this
- There is too much to do

FEELINGS

- Worried
- Useless
- Afraid
- Overwhelmed
- Agitated

PHYSICAL

- Palpitations
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Feeling shaky
- Tiredness

BEHAVIOUR

- Avoiding people
- Not eating / comfort eating
- Crying
- Trying to do too much
- Arguing



Challenging and changing your thinking

Not everyone is affected in the same way by situations and events. What might cause one person to feel stress and anxiety may not affect another in the same way.

It is not the situation or event that causes stress and anxiety but how you think about the event that impacts how you behave and how you feel mentally and physically. If you tend to think about things in an unhelpful way, it can lead to what we call a *vicious circle* - where all your thoughts, mental and physical feelings and behaviour all feed into each other, making you feel worse and worse.

For example you may think: 'I can't cope', which makes you feel overwhelmed. You may have difficulty sleeping, which makes you feel exhausted. Before you know it you're caught in that 'vicious circle' which can be difficult to break. The good news is that you can challenge and in many cases break the circle by changing 'unhelpful thoughts' into 'more helpful' thoughts.



If you are feeling stressed, try to put things in perspective by asking yourself some basic questions:

Will it matter in 6 months?

Are my thoughts based on facts?

What's the worst that can happen?



Is there another way to think about my problem?

What advice would I give a friend in this situation?

Examples:

SITUATION	UNHELPFUL THOUGHT	MORE HELPFUL THOUGHT
Didn't get enough sleep	I will never get through today. I have so much to do.	I will try and get rest when the baby sleeps, or I will ask for help.
Losing contact with friends	I have no friends	I have friends - it's just difficult to stay in touch at the moment
Arguing with partner	Everything is going wrong - we're growing apart	We're just tired like many parents - we'll work it out
House is a mess	I'm useless - I can't even keep this place tidy	I'm doing my best and looking after baby is my priority



Tips for dealing with stress



Get some fresh air and exercise - research shows that exercise is a great way to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety.



Don't let small problems mount up - try breaking your problems into smaller chunks and deal with them one by one.



Try to get rest if and when you can.



Try some basic relaxation exercises.



Be kind to yourself - don't try to do too much, and give yourself credit for what you achieve.



Be assertive - you can't please everyone all the time, so sometimes it's ok to say 'no'.



Ask for help - it is not a sign of weakness, and this is probably one time in your life when you really need it!

Get some more ideas for other ways to manage your stress and maintain good mental health later in the booklet.

For more information please visit: www.mindingyourhead.info where you can download the booklet 'Steps to deal with Stress' produced by the Public Health Agency

Get into a routine

Divide your day into three parts - morning, afternoon, and evening - and plan something for each part. Try to get a mix of things you enjoy, things you have to do, and things that will encourage contact with other people.



I enjoy:

Playing with baby

Things to do:

Preparing dinner

Stay connected:

Talking to a neighbour



I enjoy:

Reading

Things to do:

Attending appointments

Stay connected:

Texting or meeting up with a friend



I enjoy:

Going for a walk

Things to do:

Doing the laundry

Stay connected:

Talking to partner

Mental ill-health in pregnancy/parenthood

Depression is.... more than the 'normal' feelings of sadness we all experience from time to time to time. It is a common mental illness that affects our thinking, feelings, behaviour and physical wellbeing.



Did you know?

Antenatal Depression and *Postnatal Depression* affect about 10-15% of women.

The Baby Blues

In the three days following childbirth, most women, although they are tired and may have difficulty sleeping, still feel happy and excited. This is sometimes referred to as *'The Pinks'*. However, some women feel a sense of anti-climax and may even be indifferent to their new baby initially. These feelings are generally normal and pass in a matter of days.

The Baby Blues, which affects over 50% of new mothers, normally starts around the third day after childbirth and lasts for a few days. Baby blues are characterised by mood swings and irritability and are generally attributed to hormonal changes and tiredness.

Antenatal Depression

Antenatal depression affects about 10-15% of women in the first three months of pregnancy. Women at increased risk include those who have pre-existing depression prior to pregnancy and those who have other risk factors, such as those listed on the next page.

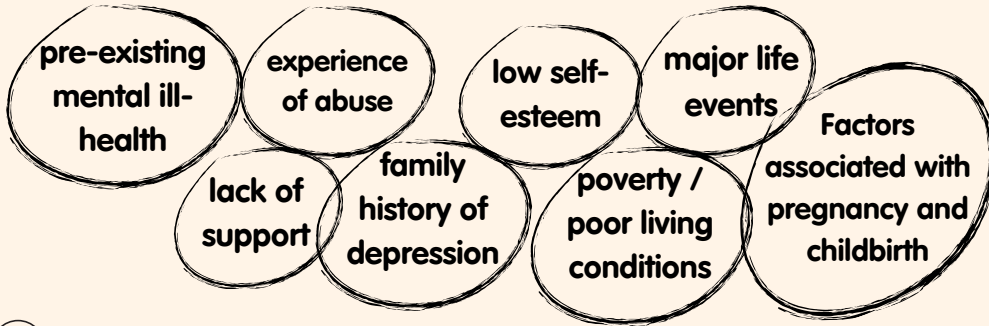


Risk factors for Postnatal Depression

There is no single cause of postnatal depression (PND). Although hormonal changes during pregnancy and after childbirth can trigger mood changes, only some women develop PND, so hormonal changes are unlikely to be the sole cause.

Research indicates that a wide range of factors may increase the risk. However, it is important to note that being at increased risk does not mean that you will definitely develop PND.

Risk Factors for Postnatal Depression:



Sometimes there is no apparent reason - it just happens.



Postnatal Depression

Postnatal depression affects about 10-15% of women. It generally starts within one or two months following childbirth (but may occur any time up to a year). As a result, the condition can go undiagnosed, and the symptoms are attributed to feeling tired from coping with the baby (and other children) and having interrupted sleep.

Let's talk about dad and co-parents...

Fathers may also experience postnatal depression. Research indicates that depression rates for men in the first year following childbirth can significantly increase.

The number of men who become depressed in the first year after becoming a dad is double that of the general population.



For more information please visit: www.nct.org.uk/postnataldepression-dads





Postpartum Psychosis

This is a serious and rare illness which affects about 1 in 1000 women in the first six weeks following childbirth.

Those affected may become psychotic i.e. lose contact with reality, and may experience delusions and/or hallucinations. Despite its severity, with the correct treatment, women affected by the illness can make a full recovery.

Although it can happen to any mother, those most at risk include those with a previous diagnosis of a severe mental illness, including bipolar or schizophrenia. Women who have had postpartum psychosis before or have a mother or sister who has had the illness are also at an increased risk.

For more information please visit: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/postpartum-psychosis

Symptoms of *Postnatal Depression*

THINKING

I'm not a good parent
I can't do anything right
I should be able to do so much more
Everyone is coping better than me
I've lost all my friends

FEELINGS

Worthless
Guilty
Loss of enjoyment
Inadequate
Isolated

PHYSICAL

Tired
Lethargic
Aches and pains
Weight loss or gain
Loss of libido

BEHAVIOUR

Comfort eating
Not sleeping
Arguing with partner
Being over protective
Staying in
Crying



Help for postnatal depression

Like all illnesses, the sooner you get help, the better. So if you feel that you are experiencing some of the symptoms of PND you should talk to your GP, midwife or health visitor in the first instance. They may recommend one or a combination of the following.

Talking Therapies:

such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which focuses on you changing your thinking and behaviour in order to make you feel better mentally and physically.

Self-Help:

is vitally important whether you are trying to maintain your mental health or coping with the illness. Although you may feel tired and lacking in motivation, evidence shows that starting to do things can help make you feel better. Try to start with something you used to enjoy and take it slowly, one step at a time.

Support Groups:

brings you into contact with other people experiencing the illness so that you can share experiences and support each other.

Counselling:

may also be of use as it can enable you to address some of the issues which may be contributing to your illness.

Relaxation Therapies:

such as Mindfulness, meditation or yoga.

Medication:

depending on the number and severity of symptoms and your previous history, your doctor may prescribe antidepressant medication which can help ease the symptoms and help to make you feel better.

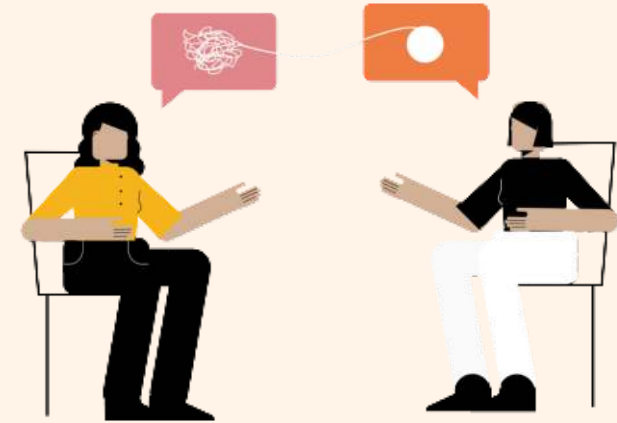
Complementary Therapies:

such as reflexology, Indian head massage, foot/hand massage or aromatherapy may also be helpful.

Let's talk about medication...

Antidepressant medication may take between 6-8 weeks to have an effect, so it is important to take the correct dosage and continue taking them as long as your doctor has directed. This may be for at least six months after you start to feel better. Modern antidepressants have relatively few side effects, although you may experience some of the following - nausea, dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, and feeling dizzy or shaky. These should pass as your body gets used to the medication, but if they persist or there is no improvement in your mood, you should talk to your GP.

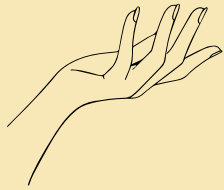
If you are breastfeeding, tell your GP so that they can prescribe the safest antidepressant for you.



For more information please visit:
www.choiceandmedication.org/hscni

Take 5 Approach to Wellbeing

Worldwide research indicates that the following are the most evidence-based ways of looking after your mental health. They are sometimes referred to as the '*Five ways to Wellbeing*' or '*Take 5*'.



Give:

Give your time and your love to others.



Be Active:

Build exercise into your everyday life.



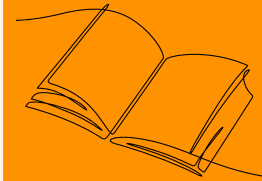
Connect:

Stay connected to the people around you.



Take Notice:

Focus on the present and savour each moment.



Keep Learning:

You do a lot of learning in pregnancy and parenthood.

For more information please visit:
www.mindingyourhead.info

You might also find these things helpful...

EAT AS WELL AS YOU CAN:



Eating a balanced diet during pregnancy and parenthood is very important for the physical and mental wellbeing of you and your baby.

CUT DOWN ON CAFFEINE:



If you're feeling anxious, cutting down on caffeine may help. Try replacing some of your tea, coffee, and soft drinks with water.

GET ENOUGH SLEEP:



Getting enough sleep can be difficult especially in the weeks following childbirth. Aim to nap when possible and work on establishing a sleep routine over time.

EASY ON THE ALCOHOL:



Alcohol is a depressant and can worsen low moods. If you're breastfeeding or expressing milk, it's best to completely avoid alcohol.

LOOK GOOD, FEEL GOOD:



Take some time out for yourself. Looking your best can make you feel good. Make time for important things such as showering and dressing.

THE POWER OF MUSIC:



Music can be a powerful mood booster. So try putting on some of your favourite music, sing along if you like. Baby will enjoy it too!



Supporting your baby's emotional development

Recent research has shown that your baby's brain development begins as early as five weeks after conception and continues to develop right up to adolescence and beyond.

However, the first 3 years or 1000 days are especially important as this is the time that the brain grows most rapidly. Even from the earliest days, your baby's brain is like a sponge, taking in every little bit of information from you and everything it comes into contact with. Your baby's life experience in those vital years will help shape the person that he/she becomes for the rest of their life.

For more information on brain development and connection please visit: www.connectedbaby.net

...ARE KIND
and patient
with me.

...WONDER
and accept
what I am
feeling.

...COMFORT
and cuddle
with me.

I am a baby

...SMILE
laugh and
enjoy being
with me.

I will thrive when you...

...LISTEN,
talk, sing and
read with me.





Connecting with your baby

As a parent, you have a vital role to play. Therefore, looking after your own emotional wellbeing will have a direct and positive influence on your baby's emotional wellbeing.

Acknowledging when you are stressed, anxious or tired is the starting point to receiving the help and support you need. Talking to the right people, such as family, friends, and health professionals, can often make a big difference.

Whether it's practical, emotional or financial assistance you need, putting these supports into place at an early stage will help you manage your stress levels, form healthy connections and enjoy time with your baby.

Here are some ideas on how you can make small changes to improve the emotional wellbeing of both you and your baby.

...ARE KIND
and caring to
myself.

...ACCEPT
what I am
feeling.

...TALK TO
others about
how I feel.

I am a parent

...NOTICE
things that
make me
smile.

I will enjoy my baby when I...

...ACCEPT
comfort and
support.



You could try some of the below suggestions...

Comfort and cuddle: it probably goes without saying that all babies love cuddles and many studies have shown that cuddling has huge benefits for both you and your baby. Always try to ensure that your baby is warm, dry and comfortable, as this attention to physical wellbeing is important to building emotional attachment.

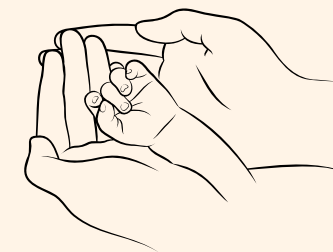
Listen and talk: read or sing to your baby - even though your baby doesn't understand what you are saying; they love the sound of your voice. Try to face your baby so that he or she can see your expressions. Songs and nursery rhymes are great fun and learning. Listen for cues and talk soothingly. Try clapping along and making fun noises at the same time.

Smile, laugh and enjoy being with me: by playing games such as peek-a-boo. Babies love games and quickly learn what to do. Make bath time and nappy changing fun by playing games or singing. Go for a walk with baby facing you, sing and talk to your baby. Maintain eye contact, leave down your mobile phone, and give your baby your full attention. When your baby accomplishes something new show your pleasure and provide encouragement - clap your hands say 'Yay!' Don't forget to celebrate your child's own special and unique personality during each developmental milestone.

Be kind and patient with me: when engaging with your baby, talk to them soothingly using a kind voice and gentle hands. As you become more in tune with your baby, listen and watch for cues. Feeding a baby can be a special time and young babies often need fed frequently, it is important to be flexible and to respond to what your baby needs. If breastfeeding, be patient with yourself and allow yourself time to learn and develop your relationship.

Wonder and accept: that your baby is unique and has his or her own range of emotions like you. Although you may not always understand what they are feeling, it's important to remember they need love and reassurance. Babies are easily over and under-stimulated, so if they turn their head away, appear irritated or cry, it is probably a sign that they want to stop the activity.

When you create a close, connected relationship in a healthy way, your child will feel safe, secure and protected physically and emotionally.



Further support from AWARE NI



Mental health support groups, both in-person and online.



Information outreach and raising awareness.



Education and training/wellbeing programmes.



An interactive website with information and factsheets.



Mindfulness programmes

Mental Health: Useful websites & apps

Action on Postpartum Psychosis

Helping families affected by postpartum psychosis.



Association for Postnatal Illness

Information on Baby Blues and PND.



AWARE NI

Mental health support groups, factsheets, and wellbeing programmes.



Birth & Beyond

Counselling for pregnant women and mothers.



Birth Trauma Association

Supporting parents who had difficult birth experiences.



The Parent Rooms

Wellbeing programmes, one-to-one advice, guidance and counselling.



Lifeline

A crisis response helpline for people experiencing distress or despair.

Open 24hrs a day.

 **0808 808 8000**

PANDAS Foundation

PND awareness and support.



Mental Health: Useful websites & apps

PND and Me

Provides information about perinatal mental illness.



Support2gether

Help for families living with Antenatal and Postnatal Depression.



Directory of mental health organisations in your area:



Navigating Pregnancy & Parenthood: Useful websites & apps

Action for Children

Provide services and support for families.



Best Beginnings Baby Buddy App

Interactive pregnancy and parenting app.



Family Support Hubs:

Provides services for families experiencing difficulties.



Helplines Network NI

Provide a range for various issues.



Navigating Pregnancy & Parenthood: Useful websites & apps

Home Start:

Help parents who are isolated or have difficulty accessing services.



Parenting NI:

Support line, wraparound support and training



Parentline NI:

Helpline for advice, support, or guidance.

Open Mon to Sat, 9am-9pm

0808 802 0400

TAMBA

Information for parents with twins and multiple births.



The Dad Network

A Dad's perspective on parenting.



Tommys.org

Information hub covering conception to birth.



TinyLife

Northern Ireland's premature and vulnerable baby charity.



Scan the QR codes with your phone



For further information about Mood Matters Parent and Baby Programme and our other services, visit aware-ni.org or email training@aware-ni.org



AWARE is the depression charity for Northern Ireland

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