



**Your guide to...**  
**Pregnancy, family and mental health**

## Pregnancy, parenthood and mental health

**Pregnancy and having a baby is a special and memorable time in a parent's life, however, it can be a difficult time too.**

**A variety of emotions, experiences, and expectations can get in the way of how you might feel as a parent and how you feel about your baby.**

It is not unusual to develop a mental health problem around the time of having a baby. This can happen to any parent, mother, father or other primary care giver.

Having difficulties with your mental health can make being a parent more challenging.

We want to ensure that all parents have the support they need, so that they can feel physically and mentally well, and can get off to the best start in their relationship with their baby.

### What are perinatal mental health problems?

Perinatal means the period of time after conception up to the baby's first birthday.

Depression is the most commonly known perinatal mental health problem. This is often referred to as Post natal depression. Post natal depression is a type of depression that occurs after having a baby. Depression can also happen during pregnancy - this is known as antenatal depression.

The symptoms of depression can include:

- Depressed mood, such as feeling sad, empty or tearful
- Reduced interest and loss of pleasure
- Decrease or increase in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping more than normal
- Restlessness or slowed behaviour

- Tiredness
- Feelings of worthlessness, excessive guilt or blame
- Trouble making decisions or concentrating

Sometimes parents with depression may experience symptoms such as thoughts of harming themselves or the baby.

If you have such thoughts it is important to seek professional help - speak to your GP, Health Visitor or Midwife. If you feel you or your baby are at risk from such thoughts, it is important to attend A&E. Support is available to help you keep yourself and your baby safe.

Other common mental health problems that can occur during pregnancy or when the baby arrives include: anxiety, panic, phobias, obsessive compulsive difficulties or trauma – perhaps from the birth itself.

Some expectant parents experience overwhelming fears about the birth. For some parents this can make it very difficult to participate in antenatal care and birth plans . If this is something which you are experiencing it is important to inform your midwife or GP. There is specialist help and understanding available to support you.

*For the purpose of this booklet, we use the term parent to apply to anyone who is a primary care giver during the perinatal period.*



Another mental health problem which can occur around the time of having a baby is postpartum psychosis. This can develop very suddenly after giving birth or for some women it can develop over the early days of parenthood.

Signs of post partum psychosis may include:

- having hallucinations
- being paranoid and suspicious
- feeling unable to settle or sleep even when baby is asleep
- feeling very low or very high in mood
- Being agitated
- Being confused
- having delusions  
(thoughts or beliefs that are unlikely to be true)

If you or someone you know is presenting with such symptoms it is important to get urgent medical support. You can get this support through your local A and E department. Advice can also be sought by phoning the perinatal community mental health team on 0161 271 0188. Post partum psychosis is treatable and specialist support is available.



Perinatal mental health problems can leave some parents feeling distant from their baby and other parents feeling protective and anxious when apart from their baby.

Struggling with mental health problems affects everyone differently. Some parents may have trouble adjusting to the new routine and tasks involved in caring for a baby. They may worry a lot about the baby's wellbeing and may feel unconfident as a parent. Some parents also struggle to cope with troublesome thoughts and difficult feelings.

Perinatal mental health problems can lead to changes in thinking which may include thoughts such as, "My baby doesn't like me, I'm a bad parent, I'm not good enough". For some parents this can lead to frightening thoughts about harming themselves or the baby. It is important to seek immediate help if you experience such thoughts.

Having problems with your wellbeing during the perinatal period does not mean that you don't want or love your baby. It is important to remember that mental health issues are treatable and help is available so that these distressing thoughts and feelings can pass.

**If you feel you or your baby is at risk go to your closest A&E department and seek help immediately. There are trained professionals based in A&E who can help you think about what support you and your family need.**

## Why do perinatal mental health problems occur?

There are many factors which can lead to mental health problems occurring around the time of having a baby. Having a baby can place great demands upon you and your body from the normal process of pregnancy, exhaustion from sleep deprivation, hormonal changes and possible complicated experiences of pregnancy and delivery. Commonly experienced emotional demands around this time can also place you at increased vulnerability in your mental health.

You may have imagined what it would like to grow your family and the reality may feel very different.

You may have an absence of feelings all together. Your feelings about yourself, your partner, your own parents and your baby may be mixed. You may not instantly love your baby or, you may feel that you aren't in tune with your baby.

This can cause many parents to worry. Feeling like a parent and growing into parenthood can take time and attention. It does not happen automatically for some of us and that's not our fault.

Becoming a parent involves many huge role changes and with any role change we can struggle adjusting and perhaps feel deskilled and out of our depth. We may have a longing for things to be as they used to be, and may struggle to see the new role as positive or manageable. If we do experience a struggle in accepting our new role as a parent, our wellbeing could be vulnerable.

You can be more vulnerable to developing mental health problems if you judge yourself too harshly for having mixed feelings or for struggling. This judgment and self-blame may involve negative, self-critical and other unhelpful thoughts such as worrying that other people are judging you.

It is recognised that around the time of becoming a parent it is normal for any parent to become preoccupied with a number of thoughts:



- Can I / will I be able to care for my baby well enough?
- Can I / will I relate to my baby and help he/she feel loved?
- Who can / will support me?
- What kind of parent am I / will I be?
- What will my baby be like?
- Will they/ do they like me?
- How were my parents with me as a baby? Will I be like them?
- Who am I now?
- What if I or my baby gets unwell?
- How can I keep my baby safe from harm?

These worries are normal and commonly experienced by parents but we are more vulnerable to developing mental health problems, if these worries persist and do not go away.

Becoming a parent is a major stress and if we feel isolated without adequate support, we may feel naturally overwhelmed which can also put us at risk.



A complicated journey to parenthood, due to the process of assisted conception or adoption, may bring greater risk of emotional difficulties.

Our own experience of being parented, especially early on in life can have a significant impact upon how we think about our experience of becoming a parent. If we experienced a difficult relationship with our own parents, we may find that the arrival of our child stirs up thoughts and feelings which we perhaps buried away.

If we have lost a parent we may also experience the re-surfacing of grief and loss. We may find that such experiences affect our feelings and thoughts about ourselves and our baby. This can make us feel more vulnerable.

Experiencing the loss of a baby can leave parents needing extra help to support their mental health.

## **What can be done to treat perinatal mental health problems, such as PND and anxiety?**

A lot of research has been done into how to treat perinatal mental health problems. This research has been used by NICE





(The National Institute of Clinical Excellence) to develop best treatment guidelines. NICE recommend that parents experiencing Perinatal mental health problems are offered psychological therapy along with increased social support.

Consideration of medication is also recommended. Your Doctor can think with you about how to do this safely. Specialist advice around taking medication during pregnancy and breastfeeding is available from the Perinatal Mental Health Team.

Decisions about medication are made on an individual basis by your doctors; GP, obstetrician and sometimes a psychiatrist.

## What can I do to help myself?

### Remove self-blame

Perinatal mental health problems are diagnosable conditions and having a mental health condition is not your fault. So try to avoid blaming yourself. Self-blaming thoughts are common but will make your mood lower. People sometimes say that it can be hard to accept mental health problems as an illness that deserves support, as there are no visible symptoms. If the symptoms are not treated they can be very disabling and escalate. Remember it's not your fault and you deserve support. Think about how you can be a friend to yourself.

### Be flexible

Doing everyday tasks can feel like climbing a mountain when you are struggling with your mental health. Depression and anxiety can take away energy, motivation, concentration, interest and confidence. Simply managing unpleasant symptoms can take a lot of energy. It is important to change your expectations and let go of what you don't need to do. Accept what is good enough.

Conserve your energy for the important needs of yourself and your baby and be flexible about what you think "should" be done.

Think about the 'heart sink' times of day or particular activities which you are finding more difficult and seek support. For example, if you find it hard to get going in the morning, consider asking someone to help take your older child to school. Another example is, if you notice you are more irritable around bath time, ask your partner to take over – give yourself a break.

## **Become an expert in your condition**

When diagnosed with a condition it can help our recovery to find out more about the condition and how to manage its symptoms. Therapy can help you to do this.

Learning from other people who have been through something similar can be really helpful. For further information you can check out one of the following websites:

**[www.app-network.org](http://www.app-network.org)**

**Action for postpartum psychosis** - advice and support.

**[www.maternalocd.org](http://www.maternalocd.org)** - advice and support.

**[www.bestbeginnings.org.uk](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk)** – watch a series of films about baby bonding, and mental health during the perinatal period.

**[www.pandasfoundation.org.uk](http://www.pandasfoundation.org.uk)** – pre and postnatal depression advice and support.

**[www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org)** – association for postnatal illness

**[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)** – national mental health charity (enter postnatal depression into the search engine for a downloadable information sheet).

**[www.youtube.com/watch?v=8isPZ8JYTR8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8isPZ8JYTR8)** – Getting it right from the start. A Youtube film about getting to know your baby.

## **Be active in your recovery and involve others**

Recovery is a journey which begins when we commit to doing whatever we can to heal. It requires your active participation.

Mental health problems like depression can leave us feeling passive and helpless. We may withdraw from daily activities and other people making our world smaller. This limits opportunities for experiencing pleasant emotions and focusing our mind on pleasant thoughts. This can become a vicious cycle that maintains our mental health problem.

- Try to gradually re-involve yourself in antidepressant activities which provide positive emotions and encourage pleasant thoughts, such as physical activity, self care, better diet, meeting friends etc
- Think about what you used to enjoy and that may bring you pleasure.
- Involve someone else in this goal to encourage you to share the enjoyment.
- Talk to other people about how you are feeling. This will help them understand better how to support you and will help you feel less alone.

Sharing your thoughts and feelings can help you to feel more in control and more contained. Talking to others can also help us learn that we are maybe not so different and that others may have experienced similar thoughts and feelings.



## Ask for help

Mental health problems like depression can affect how we are around other people and therefore may have an effect upon those close to us, including our baby. This is not your fault and does not mean that you do not care about those close to you. By becoming more aware of your symptoms, you can ask for support from people around you to help you and your family.

If you don't feel you have support within your own circle of friends/family you can speak to a NHS professional such as your midwife or health visitor. Alternatively you can contact one of the services below:

**Midwifery Services:** If you have ANY concerns please contact your Community Midwife (community midwives office number) or the Maternity Triage Unit (24 hour number- 7 days a week) at the hospital which you plan to give birth. Contact numbers are on the front of your pregnancy handheld notes.

**Health Visiting:** Parents are able to contact their named Health Visitor or Health Visiting team by telephone from 9am until 5pm during week days (excluding bank holidays)

- Shevington Clinic, Boston House, Longshoot Clinic - 01942 482117
- Pemberton Clinic, Chandler House - 01942 481983
- Ashton Clinic, Hindley Clinic, Platt Bridge Clinic - 01942 483891
- Leigh Clinic and Golborne Clinic - 01942 483689
- Atherton Health Centre/Astley Clinic/Tyldesely Clinic - 01942 481018

**Wigan Building Attachments and Bonds Support service (BABS team):** We are a small specialist team who are trained to work with parents/ carers and infants from conception upto the age of three years. We know it's not easy. Parenting can be a challenge and can evoke many mixed emotions.

This can be triggered by your own experience of being parented, social health or economic stress, personal relationship and everyday stresses. Working alongside you we have a number of tools to help with any current difficulties and to help understand the needs of your baby. Our team is community based and works across Wigan and Leigh making access to our service easy for you and will be flexible to meet your needs. For more information about the service please contact us on 01942 764 448 or visit [www.gmmh.nhs.uk/building-attachments-and-bonds-support](http://www.gmmh.nhs.uk/building-attachments-and-bonds-support)

**Think Wellbeing:** Think Wellbeing offers free NHS therapy for people registered with a Wigan GP with common mental health problems like anxiety or depression, with the aim to help you change the way you feel by changing the way you think. Visit [www.gmmh.nhs.uk/think-wellbeing](http://www.gmmh.nhs.uk/think-wellbeing) or Telephone: 01942 264 051

**Greater Manchester Specialist Perinatal Community Mental Health Team:** A service designed to support women who experience complex mental health problems during and after pregnancy, and for their infant up to the age of 1-2yrs. Please speak to a health professional to discuss a referral. Telephone: 0161 271 0188.

**Pregnancy and Early Childhood Resources:** You may find the resources on this page a helpful start to getting the support you need: [www.gmmh.nhs.uk/pregnancy-resources](http://www.gmmh.nhs.uk/pregnancy-resources)

If you feel that you are in a crisis situation and unable to attend to your family's needs or unable to keep your family safe from harm, it is important to seek urgent support from social care services. They can work with you to consider what support you need to help you and your family move forward positively. Contact your local service: 01942 828300







## Alternative formats

If you need help to understand this information, require it in another format such as large print, spoken (on CD) or Braille, or require it in a different language – speak to a member of staff.



Scan this code to hear other parents talking about their experience of perinatal mental health difficulties and to find out how you can access support for you and your family

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