

# Pregnancy, Parenthood and Mental Health

Information for patients



## 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.**

More than 1 in 10 mothers and 3 in 10 fathers can experience some type of mental health problem during pregnancy and in the first years of their child's life.

Sometimes when the mother, father or partner is not mentally well, they can benefit from support around the relationship with their baby.

We want to ensure parents have the support they need so that they can feel physically and mentally well and go on to develop 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.

Post Natal Depression (PND) is the most commonly known perinatal mental health problem and can be experienced by mothers and fathers.

PND is a type of depression that occurs around the time of having a baby. It can develop either during pregnancy (antenatal depression) or after delivery. The symptoms of PND 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 PND may experience more severe symptoms such as thoughts of harming themselves or the baby.

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

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 these thoughts persist.

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.**

## Why do perinatal mental health problems occur?

Becoming a parent is a major life change. You may have imagined becoming a parent for many years before it actually happened. Your fantasy of becoming a parent may be very different from what it actually feels like to have your baby with you.

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 s/he feel loved?
- Who can / will support me?
- What kind of parent am I / will I be?
- What is / 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?

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.

Our own experience of being parented, especially early on in life can have a significant impact upon how we think about our experience 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.

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

PND is an illness and has recommended treatment guidelines. NICE (The National Institute of Clinical Excellence) recommend that parents experiencing PND are offered psychological therapy along with increased social support.

Consideration of antidepressant medication is also recommended although with caution for pregnant and breast feeding women due to possible effects upon the baby.

Decisions about medication are made on an individual basis by your doctors; GP, Obstetrician and sometimes a Psychiatrist. The other perinatal mental health problems mentioned in this leaflet also have NICE recommendations about psychological therapy and medication for these conditions.

**Perinatal Mental Health Problems are treatable and with support, parents do recover and go on to enjoy developing their relationship with their baby. The relationships parents have with their baby are the greatest asset they can nurture.**

## What can I do to help myself?

### Remove self-blame

Perinatal mental health problems are diagnosable conditions and having a mental health issues 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 for a few weeks. Another example is, if you notice you are more irritable around bath time, ask your partner to take over for a few days – 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.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.

The following sites raise awareness of the role of the father in the family. They focus mainly on mental health problems that dads may experience during the perinatal period.

**Facebook:** @DadMattersUK

**Twitter:** @dad\_matters

**[www.dadmatters.org.uk](http://www.dadmatters.org.uk)**

### 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. For more information please visit:

**[www.penninecare.nhs.uk/healthyminds](http://www.penninecare.nhs.uk/healthyminds)** – for information about psychological therapies



## 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 the service below:

### Home start

[www.home-starthost.org.uk](http://www.home-starthost.org.uk)

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.

## Patient Advice and Liaison Service

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) acts on behalf of service users, families and carers to negotiate prompt solutions and help bring about changes in the way that services are developed. As well as providing a confidential advice and support service, PALS will help guide you through the different services available from the NHS.

**Tel: 0161 716 3178**

## Comments and complaints

We want to learn from comments and complaints about our services. If you have any, please speak with a member of staff. Every effort will be made to resolve any concerns and complaining will not cause any difficulties in your care with us. You can also contact the Trust's Complaints Department via post at Trust Headquarters, 225 Old Street, Ashton-under-Lyne, OL6 7SR.

**Tel: 0161 716 3083**

**Email: [complaints.penninecare@nhs.net](mailto:complaints.penninecare@nhs.net)**

## Become a member of our Trust

You can be the voice of your community by electing or becoming a governor, find out more about your local mental health and community services, and receive updates, comment on our plans and get invitations to health events.

**Tel: 0161 716 3960**

**Email: [ftmembership.penninecare@nhs.net](mailto:ftmembership.penninecare@nhs.net)**

## 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.

# Working together **LIVING WELL**

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 [www.penninecare.nhs.uk](http://www.penninecare.nhs.uk)

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