



POSTNATAL DEPRESSION & ANXIETY

A SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR PARTNERS

Acacia Family Support Improving
the lives of mothers and families
affected by postnatal depression/
anxiety



ACACIA

FAMILY SUPPORT

We are a Christian charity working across Birmingham to provide a wide range of support services free of charge.

Our services for mums are focused on helping them recover from the symptoms associated with pre and postnatal depression, and/or anxiety.

We also support partners. We can work closely with both parents. Maternal mental health problems affect the entire family. Acacia is here to help.

We have been supporting families affected by postnatal depression and anxiety for fifteen years after being set up by two local mothers who both experienced postnatal depression and were determined to help other families.

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WHAT IS **DEPRESSION?**

We all go through periods of feeling miserable and 'out of sorts'. These periods rarely last longer than a day or perhaps a few days and don't interfere with our day-to-day lives to any great extent. These are normal parts of our human experience and are not depression.

Depression is a common mental health problem affecting millions of people around the world at any point in time. Anxiety is almost always a component of depression and sometimes the anxiety is the dominant symptom. People who are experiencing depression/anxiety have a number of changes to their mood, their thinking, their behaviour and their bodily functioning which persist for weeks or months, which can lead to major disruption in their lives. People with depression/anxiety will typically complain of a number of symptoms that may include:

- Persistent feelings of sadness and low mood, although some will find that their mood fluctuates during the day
- Poor concentration leading to difficulty in making decisions and performing normal everyday tasks
- Feeling unable to cope with the normal demands of life
- Sleep disturbance – either difficulty in getting off to sleep or waking in the early hours and not being able to get back to sleep, or both of these
- Reduced interest and sense of pleasure in normally enjoyed activities
- Loss of interest in sex
- Tiredness and reduced energy
- Poor appetite and consequent weight loss (although some people find they overeat and then gain weight)
- Avoidance of contact with other people
- Intrusive thoughts including thoughts of suicide.

Anxiety symptoms may include feeling persistently afraid, worried, nervous, on edge, detached, panicky.

These symptoms exist on a spectrum of severity ranging from mild through moderate to severe and sometimes life-threatening.



WHAT CAUSES IT?

There is no single cause of depression/anxiety. It's better to think in terms of a combination of factors which can increase the risk of it developing. These are:

Our genetic make-up

Someone is at greater risk of developing depression/anxiety at some point in their life if a close family member such as a parent has experienced it.

Our psychological make-up and personality

The way we each uniquely develop into adulthood through our childhood and early years has a role in determining how resilient we are in dealing with the hands that life deals us.

Life events themselves

Major negative life events such as bereavement, relationship breakdown, redundancy and unemployment quite naturally have an impact on our emotional well-being. Circumstances such as social isolation and loneliness can increase our vulnerability.

Even positive events such as impending or new parenthood requires change and adaptation to new circumstances and can have a negative impact on our emotional well-being. Several such events happening close together can quickly add up to overwhelm our normal coping resources.

Physical illnesses

Chronic, painful, debilitating or life-threatening conditions can all impact on our state of mind. Some viral infections seem to precipitate depression in some individuals.

WHO CAN GET IT?

Anybody can get depression/anxiety and at any time of life. It is no respecter of gender, age, culture or social background.

It's important to keep in mind that it is not a sign of a 'weak character' or other inadequacy.

Many gifted, successful and powerful people have experienced depression/anxiety in their lives.



WHAT IS POSTNATAL DEPRESSION & ANXIETY?

PND/anxiety is an illness which develops in new mothers following childbirth. In some mothers it happens fairly suddenly and within a few weeks after giving birth. They often describe it as "like a switch has been turned off." In others it develops gradually over a period of weeks and may not be noticed by those around her for quite some time. It can occur at any time in the first year, and in some mothers its start can be traced back to late pregnancy.

Postnatal depression/anxiety affects as many as 10% to 15% of all new mums. It may last for weeks or months and in some mothers may last into the child's second year if not detected and treated adequately.

The symptoms a new mum will experience are very much the same as those of depression/anxiety generally. The important difference with postnatal depression/anxiety is that there is a new and dependant baby in the mix. Also, it develops at a time when both parents usually anticipate pleasure and fulfillment in the experience of parenthood.

A mother with postnatal depression/anxiety may:

- Find it hard to learn and apply the new skills and tasks of motherhood and get into an effective routine
- Constantly think things like, "I'm a terrible mother and wife" or, "They will take my baby away"
- Have frequent worries about the health and welfare of the baby
- Have persistent, intrusive and frightening thoughts that she might harm herself or her baby
- Start to feel that the family would be better off without her.



CAN IT BE **TREATED?**

Yes, it can be treated. As with all health conditions, the sooner it is recognised and appropriate help is sought, the better.

At the milder end of the scale measures aimed at increasing practical and social support are helpful. This can be achieved through enlisting the help of family and friends to relieve some of the practical load or to spend time with her providing a listening ear and encouragement.

Local voluntary organisations like Acacia and Home-Start can play very useful roles in her recovery.

Further on up the scale more specialist psychological help such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) may be required. This can usually be arranged through mum's GP.

More severe episodes may require antidepressant medication from the GP or from local mental health services. This will usually be offered in conjunction with CBT and social support.

An episode of PND/anxiety will generally resolve within a matter of weeks or months. Recovery rarely follows a smooth path and typically involves ups and downs. The best advice is to take it one day at a time.



HOW CAN PND/ANXIETY AFFECT PARTNERS

As a partner and a new parent, especially if it's your first child, you probably have additional worries and concerns such as:

“
HOW WILL
A NEW BABY
AFFECT OUR
RELATIONSHIP
AND OUR
LIVES?
”

“
CAN WE
MANAGE
FINANCIALLY?
”

“
AM I UP TO THE
JOB OF BEING A
PARENT ?
”

You're also likely to be experiencing quite a bit of sleep disturbance and changes in your normal routine in the early weeks and months.

On top of these (and other) normal worries that many new parents have to deal with, your partner has now become a different person from the one you once knew. You may feel emotionally and physically neglected by her. She may have become irritable, hostile and abusive to you at times. Whatever you try nothing you do seems to be right.

You may be spending time at work preoccupied and wondering how things are at home. On the other hand work might be a welcome refuge from home, so you try and spend more time there. This in itself may give you conflict and guilt over where your loyalties should lie.

You may feel very isolated and alone with these concerns, not knowing who you can talk to about them. Probably one of your worst fears is whether she will ever return to the way she was before. Or is this the way it will always be from now on?



CAN PARTNERS GET IT?

As described in the previous section, if your wife or partner develops postnatal depression/anxiety then you are likely to be under considerable stress and may go on to develop it yourself.

However, even without postnatal depression/anxiety in a wife or partner, you have a higher risk of developing depression/anxiety in the first year of parenthood than similarly aged people who aren't parents. In fathers this is often referred to as paternal postnatal depression but obviously it can equally affect all partners not just male ones.

Many partners find it hard to talk about such feelings and bottle them up for quite a long period of time. They may then go on to express their feelings with irritability and short temper to those around them like family, friends and work colleagues.

A lot of partners may drink more alcohol, take other drugs or participate in other out of character behaviours in an attempt to deal with these feelings. The combination of these mean that they are less likely to be seen as depressed by those around them and are less likely to seek appropriate help and treatment in dealing with their depression.

Remember, depression is not a sign of weakness any more than a physical health problem is. It is a treatable health condition.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, smiling warmly while holding a newborn baby wrapped in a white blanket. The woman is looking towards the camera. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a home setting.

HOW CAN YOU HELP...

“ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS WAS RECOGNISING THAT SHE WAS DEPRESSED AND NOT ENJOYING BEING A MUM.”

...YOUR WIFE OR PARTNER?

- The first step is to recognise and acknowledge that your wife or partner is ill right now
- Talk to her about it and find out more about postnatal depression/anxiety for yourself
- Listen to her and take her worrying thoughts seriously. They may seem trivial and unwarranted to you, but to her they're very serious and real
- Encourage her to seek help. The GP and Health Visitor are key people to speak to
- If she has already sought help then support her in that and involve yourself in the support she is offered
- Try not to judge her or criticise her. She's probably doing a lot of that herself right now
- Try not to retaliate in kind when she's irritable and snappy with you. Remind yourself that it isn't the real her behaving like that
- Reassure her that you are there for her and that things will improve in time
- Show love and affection but avoid overly sexual demands. She won't be ready for that for a while yet
- Help out as much as you can with the child-care and housework – and don't wait to be asked!



**“ BECOMING A PARENT
WAS SUPPOSED
TO BE AN EXCITING
EXPERIENCE; POSTNATAL
DEPRESSION MADE
IT UNBEARABLE.”**



...YOURSELF

If your wife or partner develops postnatal depression/anxiety then in addition to the advice on the last page it's very important that you take care of your own health.

- Try to maintain your normal exercise and relaxation activities – as much as time will allow right now. After all a baby gives you a good reason for a walk around your local park, which will also give your wife or partner some much needed time to herself.
- Maintain a healthy diet.
- Find someone to confide in about it. A close friend or family member perhaps. Acacia provides such a service. You are not betraying her trust by doing this. You are helping yourself to support her for the greater benefit of your family.

If you suspect that you may be becoming increasingly anxious and/or depressed then it's very important that you seek appropriate advice for yourself. Speak to your GP. Be totally honest about how you are feeling. You won't be saying anything that he or she hasn't heard before.

Don't be tempted to try to fix it yourself by drinking more alcohol or taking other recreational drugs. This will not help the situation in the long term. You really need to act quickly. You owe it to yourself, your wife or partner and, most importantly, to your new baby to ensure that you're firing on all cylinders right now. Again, Acacia provides a free support service for partners in your situation.



WHERE CAN I FIND FURTHER HELP?

Acacia Family Support

www.acacia.org.uk

Acacia is here to help you. We are a charity based in Birmingham and we provide telephone, individual face-to-face and group support to families affected by postnatal depression and/or anxiety. Acacia provides a free support service for partners who are affected by maternal mental health problems in a wife/partner or for themselves. Ring us today on 0121 301 5990 or visit our website for more information or to contact us.

Association for Post Natal Illness

www.apni.org

A national charity providing advice and telephone support to women affected by Postnatal Depression.

Depression Alliance

www.depressionalliance.org

A national charity providing information and support for individuals affected by depression.

BSol NHS Mental Health Foundation Trust

www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/bsmhft/SelfHelp

Use this link to find a great range of self-help guides.

www.nct.org.uk

<https://www.nct.org.uk/pregnancy/same-sex-parents>

Useful articles about issues affecting new same sex parents.

Home-StartUK

www.home-start.org.uk

A national charity with local branches offering support to families with children under five years and who are experiencing a range of difficulties.

MIND

www.mind.org.uk

A national mental health charity.

PANDASFoundation

www.pandasfoundation.org.uk

Offering support to individuals affected by prenatal depression, postnatal depression and postnatal psychosis.

RoyalCollegeofPsychiatrists

www.rcpsych.ac.uk

Website contains a wide range of downloadable information and advice leaflets on mental health conditions and treatments.

Living Life to the Full

www.lltff.com

Free online courses covering low mood, stress and resiliency. Work out why you feel as you do, how to tackle problems, build confidence, get going again, feel happier, stay calm, tackle upsetting thinking and more. Courses are free for individuals using them in their own lives.

Acacia is here to help you. We provide a free support service for partners who are affected by maternal mental health problems in a wife/partner or for themselves. Ring us today on **0121 301 5990** or visit our website www.acacia.org.uk or scan the QR code below with your phone camera to go to our web page



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