

# PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH

## A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR DADS AND PARTNERS



**NHS**  
Birmingham and Solihull  
Mental Health  
NHS Foundation Trust





# 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.

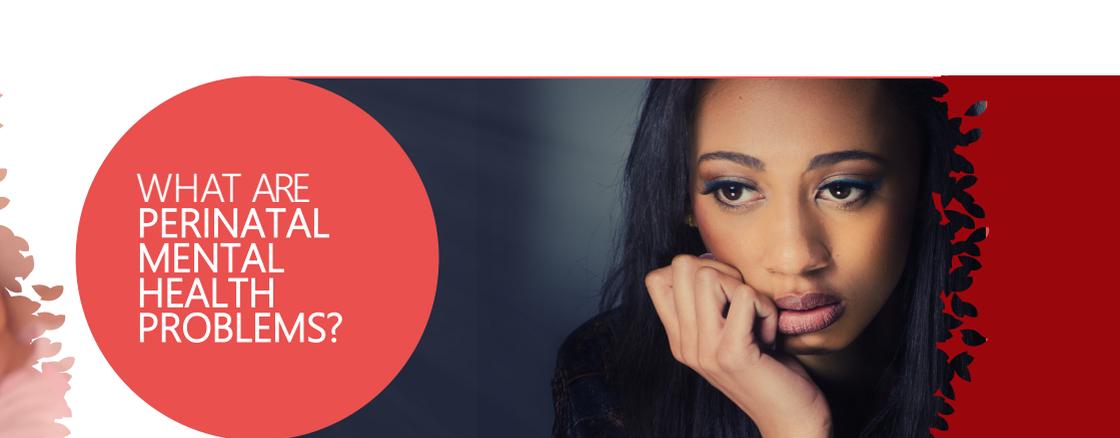
We also support dads/ partners in both Birmingham and Solihull. Perinatal mental health problems affect the entire family. Acacia is here to help.

We have been supporting families affected by postnatal depression and anxiety for over 15 years after being set up by 2 local mothers who both experienced postnatal depression and were determined to help other families.

## A SURVIVAL GUIDE

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## WHAT ARE PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?

Maternal/Paternal mental health problems, or perinatal mental health problems as they're often called, are more common than you think. In fact one in 5 new mums experience them and up to one in 10 new dads or partners. These mental health problems can range from anxiety, low mood and depression to more severe obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and psychosis. Some will have suffered mental health problems before but for others symptoms are new and frightening for the whole family.

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental health problems during pregnancy, with around 12% of women and 6% of men experiencing depression and 13% of women or 6.5% of men experiencing anxiety at some point; many will experience both. 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 and which can lead to major disruption in their lives.

The other mental health problems like panic disorder, OCD, PTSD, postpartum psychosis, exacerbation of eating disorders and tokophobia (fear of giving birth) are less common but still account for up to 8% of all new mums and can also affect their partners. It is important to remember that all of these problems, even the most severe, are usually temporary with the right treatment and support. The mums and dads who experience perinatal mental health problems cannot control their symptoms on their own. It is not their choice and they will need all your love, patience, understanding and support to get them through this.

The symptoms may lead to poor bonding with the baby and difficulties with breast-feeding (which can itself lead to distress, anxiety and low mood). Good parental mental health is very important for the the development of the baby before and after birth. This makes it really important to recognise the problem quickly, to talk about it, and to get help. This is really important for partners too. If your wife or partner is experiencing maternal mental health problems you have a one in 2 chance of developing your own and you can still develop your own even when your partner doesn't. Having a baby is a highly stressful time, fuelled by sleep deprivation and the huge increase in responsibility that comes with a baby. Nothing quite prepares you for this and when, on top of all this, your partner becomes ill, it puts you at high risk of developing a mood disorder yourself.



## TYPES OF PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

**There are many types of perinatal mental health problems and most of them include some aspect of depression and/or anxiety. Most of them can affect both partners.**

### **Postpartum Psychosis**

Postpartum psychosis is a rare but serious and potentially life threatening mental health issue. It takes the form of severe depression or mania or both. For the few women who experience postpartum psychosis, it usually occurs in the first 3 months after birth-often within the first 2 weeks and develops rapidly.

### **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

This is an anxiety disorder caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events such as traumatic labour/birth. Someone with PTSD often relives the traumatic event through nightmares and flashbacks and may experience feelings of isolation, anger, frustration, disappointment, irritability and guilt.

### **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**

OCD is an anxiety disorder which causes people to experience obsessive thoughts followed by compulsive behaviours. Obsessions are overwhelming, unwanted thoughts which cause anxiety, disgust or unease and lead to the need to carry out activities or rituals usually repetitively in an attempt to temporarily relieve the distressing feelings of the obsessive thoughts.

### **Tokophobia**

Tokophobia is a specific phobia of childbirth ie an overwhelming, debilitating fear of childbirth, which can be so intense that pregnancy and/or childbirth is avoided.

### **Postnatal Depression and Anxiety**

PND is a type of mood disorder which is usually accompanied by increased anxiety. It can range from mild to severe and occur any time from pregnancy up to 2 years following birth. Sometimes anxiety can be the dominant symptom.

## **WHO CAN GET MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS?**

Anybody can get mental health problems when having a baby, at any time of life, irrespective of gender, age, culture or social background.

It's important to keep in mind that this is not a sign of a 'weak character' or inadequacy. Many gifted, successful and powerful people have experienced mental health problems in their lives.

Additional risk factors include: if a close relative has experienced mental health problems, psychological make-up and personality, major life events, physical illnesses, isolation, relationship breakdown, money worries.



## WHAT IS POSTNATAL DEPRESSION & ANXIETY?

Pre/postnatal depression/anxiety (PND) is a depressive illness which develops in mothers and partners before or after childbirth. Anxiety is almost always a component of PND and sometimes the anxiety is the dominant symptom. In some parents it happens fairly suddenly and usually 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 them for quite some time. It can occur at any time in the first year or so and in some parents it can actually start during pregnancy. Postnatal depression may last for weeks or months and in some it may last into the child's second year if not detected and treated adequately.

The symptoms a parent will experience are very much the same as those of depression generally. The important difference with postnatal depression is that there is a new and dependant baby in the mix. Also, postnatal depression develops at a time when both parents usually anticipate pleasure and fulfillment in the experience of parenthood and this can add additional pressure to ignore and play the symptoms down and pretend everything is alright.

General depression/anxiety symptoms can include persistent feelings of sadness and low mood, poor concentration, feeling unable to cope, loss of interest in sex, tiredness, avoiding contact with people, change in appetite, loss of pleasure in normally enjoyed activities, unable to get out of bed, thoughts of suicide and/or harming self and/or the baby. Anxiety symptoms can also include feeling persistently afraid, worried, nervous, on edge, detached, panicky.

In addition, parents who are experiencing postnatal depression/anxiety may:

- find it hard to learn and apply the new skills and tasks of parenthood and get into an effective routine
- constantly think things like, "I'm a terrible mother/father/parent/partner/wife" or, "They will take my baby away"
- start to feel that the family would be better off without them
- have frequent worries about the health and welfare of the baby
- have persistent, intrusive and frightening thoughts that they might harm baby



CAN PERINATAL  
MENTAL HEALTH  
PROBLEMS BE  
**TREATED**  
EFFECTIVELY?

The good news is that perinatal mental health problems can be treated. Most mums/dads make a full recovery and, as with all health conditions, the sooner they are recognised, and appropriate help is sought, the better.

At the milder end of the scale, measures aimed at giving mums and partners some space to talk about their feelings along with 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 providing a non-judgmental listening ear and encouragement. Local voluntary organisations can play very useful roles in her recovery.

Please see back cover for more information.

Further on up the scale antidepressants or other medications may be useful and sometimes more specialist psychological help such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This can usually be arranged through the GP or local IAPT provider. The specialist community perinatal mental health teams will provide essential specialist support for those with higher needs. For the most unwell parents, treatment may include referral to the specialist perinatal team and/or to Birmingham's Mother and Baby Unit where they will receive more intensive specialist support for themselves and baby. A usual episode of depression/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.

More severe mental health problems may vary in duration but the sooner help is sought, and begins, the sooner things will start to improve.

A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark t-shirt, looking down at a baby he is holding. The baby is lying down, and the man is holding a clear plastic bottle with a yellow cap, feeding the baby. The background is a solid red color. A decorative leafy branch is visible on the right side of the image.

## HOW CAN PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AFFECT PARTNERS?

As a new parent, especially if it's your first child, you probably have the pressure of increased 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?  
”

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

This change in your relationship and family dynamics which will normally include a change in pecking order all adds to the pressure.

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.

You may be spending time at work or elsewhere, pre-occupied and worrying about 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 and whether they're normal. One of the worst fears is often whether you and/or your partner will ever be able to return to the way you were before, or is this the way it will always be from now on?



## DADS' & PARTNERS' MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

**As described previously, if your wife/partner develops a perinatal mental health problem then you are likely to be under considerable stress and are more likely to go on to develop one yourself.**

However, even without maternal mental health problems in a partner, you have a higher risk of developing depression in the first year of parenthood than similarly aged people who aren't new parents. Recent research reveals that up to one in 10 dads/partners will develop postnatal illnesses regardless of whether their partner develops it or not and this includes not just depression/anxiety but also other perinatal conditions like OCD and post traumatic stress disorder relating to the birth. You owe it to yourself and to your family to get help if you find you are struggling and recognise any of the symptoms.

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.

Some people may drink more alcohol or take other drugs in an attempt to deal with these feelings. They may also seek out increasingly risky activities. 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/anxiety.

Remember, depression/anxiety and other mental health problems are not a sign of weakness any more than a physical health problem is. They are a treatable health condition and the sooner you get help, the sooner things will start to get better.

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, and the baby is looking slightly away. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting like a home or a clinic.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP...

“ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS WAS RECOGNISING THAT SHE WAS ILL 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 them about it and find out more about postnatal depression and other maternal mental health problems for yourself. There are some links in the back of this booklet
- Listen to them and take their worrying thoughts seriously. They may seem trivial and unwarranted to you, but to them they're very serious and real
- Support your partner to seek help. The GP, Midwife and Health Visitor are key people to speak to
- If they have already sought help then support them in that and involve yourself in the support they are offered
- Try not to judge or criticise. They're probably doing a lot of that themselves right now
- Try not to retaliate in kind when they're irritable and snappy with you. Remind yourself that it isn't the real person behaving like that
- Reassure your partner that you are there for them and that things will improve in time
- Show love and affection but try to avoid overly sexual demands. Your wife/partner won't be ready for that for a while yet
- Involve yourself as much as you can with supporting the parenting and housework



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

## HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF?

**In addition to supporting your partner it's very important that you recognise your own needs and take care of your own health. You are not being selfish in doing this.**

Try to do some regular 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 you and/or your wife/partner some much needed time to yourselves.

It might sound simple but it's so important to maintain a healthy (ish) diet and eat regularly - don't skip breakfast! Your brain and your body need energy if you want them to function well and cope with increased stress.

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 you and your family.

If you suspect that you may be becoming overly anxious 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 they haven't heard before and the sooner you can get some help the sooner you can start the journey back to wellness.

**Most importantly don't put it off and 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 partner and, most importantly, your new baby to ensure that you're well and at your best right now. Again, if you feel like you are struggling Acacia provides a support service for partners in your situation so why not give us a ring or use the QR code to visit our website?**



**WHERE  
CAN I FIND  
FURTHER  
HELP?**

**BSol NHS Mental Health Foundation Trust**

[https://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/  
bsmhft/SelfHelp](https://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/bsmhft/SelfHelp)

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

**Home-Start UK**

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

A national charity with local branches offering support to families with children under 5 years who are experiencing a range of difficulties.

**Acacia Family Support**

[www.acacia.org.uk](http://www.acacia.org.uk)

Acacia is here to help you. We provide free support services for dads and partners who are affected by perinatal mental health problems. See back cover for full contact details.

**Association for Postnatal Illness**

[www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org)

A national charity providing advice and support to families affected by PND.

**DAD.info**

[www.dad.info](http://www.dad.info)

A website covering a wide breadth of advice and information for fathers. Includes sections on physical and emotional well-being.

**Living Life to the Full**

[www.lltff.com](http://www.lltff.com)

Free online courses. 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.

**MIND**

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

A national mental health charity providing information and resources.

**PANDAS Foundation**

[www.pandasfoundation.org.uk](http://www.pandasfoundation.org.uk)

Offering support to individuals affected by pre and postnatal depression and postnatal psychosis.

**Royal College of Psychiatrists**

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)

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

**Action on Postpartum Psychosis**

<https://www.app-network.org/partners>

With the help of those who have been through Postpartum Psychosis, APP have produced a brilliant free Postpartum Psychosis Insider Guide for Partners . Use the link above to get the free guide and access more in-depth information to read in conjunction with the guide.

**Dads Matter UK**

[www.dadsmatteruk.org](http://www.dadsmatteruk.org)

Dads Matter provides information and support for dads/partners worried about or suffering from Depression, Anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

# Acacia is here to help you

We provide a free support service for dads and 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/dads-partners](http://www.acacia.org.uk/dads-partners)

or

Click on the QR code box below with the camera on your phone to open a direct link to our website



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**SCAN ME**