

PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH

A SURVIVAL GUIDE

FOR DADS AND PARTNERS





ACACIA

FAMILY SUPPORT

Acacia is a Christian charity which provides a broad range of information and support free of charge to people of all faiths and none.

We have been supporting mums affected by postnatal depression and anxiety since 2004 after being set up by 2 mothers who both experienced postnatal depression and were determined to help other families.

Very early on we recognised that perinatal mental health problems can affect both parents and as a result we have also developed a focus on partners. Perinatal mental health problems affect the entire family.

This booklet has been produced specifically to help support dads and partners. We have also developed a web based resource to help to equip you with the information and support you need to help you to recognise your own needs and start you on the road to recovery.

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 and new parenthood, with around 12% of women and 6% of men experiencing depression and 13% of women and 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 usually 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 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 parents.

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, and most often within the first 2 weeks, developing 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 often followed by compulsive behaviours. Obsessions are overwhelming, unwanted thoughts which cause anxiety, disgust or unease and lead to the need to carry out activities and rituals usually repetitively in an attempt to temporarily relieve the distressing feelings of the obsessive thoughts.

Tokophobia

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

Postnatal Depression (PND) 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 the second year 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 parents 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 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 motherhood/fatherhood 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 their baby




CAN PERINATAL
MENTAL HEALTH
PROBLEMS BE
TREATED
EFFECTIVELY?

The good news is that perinatal mental health problems can be treated. Most mums and 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 dads 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-judgemental listening ear and encouragement. It is worth finding out what local voluntary organisations and support are available locally to you as these can play very useful roles in your recovery. All of this information is accessible through our website. Please see back cover for details.

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 poorly parents treatment may include referral to the specialist perinatal team and/or to the 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.



HOW CAN
PERINATAL
MENTAL HEALTH
PROBLEMS AFFECT
DADS AND
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, preoccupied 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' PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

As described previously, if your 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.

If your wife/partner is being treated by specialist perinatal mental health services, you will be offered an assessment of your own mental health and offered signposting to support as required.

However, even without maternal mental health problems in a wife/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.



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. Visit our website for more free information, resources and videos
- 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, housework etc.



“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 wife/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 needs energy if you want it to function well and cope with increased stress.

Find someone to confide in - a close friend or family member perhaps. Visit our website to see what support is available locally to you. 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/Midwife/Health Visitor. 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 get better.

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 get the ball rolling. You owe it to yourself, your wife/partner and your new baby to ensure that you're well and at your best right now. If you feel like you are struggling why don't you visit our website for a broad range of information, links and self help stuff or alternatively take a look at one of the other websites listed inside the back cover.

WHERE
CAN I FIND
**FURTHER
HELP?**

If you have concerns about mum's mental health, please contact your local perinatal mental health team:

In Luton and Bedfordshire
<https://www.elft.nhs.uk/perinatal>



In Milton Keynes
<https://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/mkperinatal>



Acacia Family Support

www.acacia.org.uk/dads-partners

Acacia is here to help you. Our dads/partners web portal has a whole host of information, self-help, links to available services and videos to help dads and other LGBTQ+ partners to help set you on your way. See back of booklet for full details.

Association For Postnatal Illness

www.apni.org

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

DAD.info

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.llttf.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.

MIND

www.mind.org.uk

A national mental health charity providing information and resources.

PANDAS Foundation

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

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

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

If you are struggling at the moment please talk to your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor and please visit our website for more information, links and free self-help resources



SCAN ME

Click on this QR code box with the camera on your phone to open a direct link to our website or visit:

www.acacia.org.uk/blmk/dads-partners