

Parenthood and Mental Health

Becoming a Parent

Becoming a new parent is a huge change and adjustment to a person's life and can often bring challenges. It changes relationships, can have an impact on finances and day to day life looks very different. Therefore, it is common for many parents to struggle at this time. It can be a time of feeling isolated, overwhelmed, anxious or low in mood.

You may have anxious thoughts such as thinking you aren't good enough and compare yourself to other parents. For example, worrying about your child's development or thinking that people are judging you can add to a downward spiral in your mood or anxiety, resulting in feeling worse. Often people may fear talking about their mood or thoughts for fear of being seen as unfit to look after your baby.



Entering parenthood is a time of learning new things, getting to know your child and learning to be a parent. It can be an opportunity to meet other parents and form new connections. This may be online if not face to face. Having a baby can bring great joys but if you are struggling with your mood then it may not be easy to enjoy or see the positives. It is normal to feel a lot of pressure and parents often feel overwhelmed with too much information or feel they can't ask questions for fear of being judged.

Expectations versus Reality

Becoming a parent brings a mixture of emotions. You may have been excited or worried or both about becoming a parent and meeting your new baby, but it may not be what you expected. Some people experience a strong sense of responsibility which can feel overwhelming. If you are already a parent you might find it more challenging than the first time, if you now have the addition of a toddler or older child to also look after. Often the media and books show perfect images of happy new parents but often this is not always the reality!



Mental health difficulties after having a baby:

Post-natal anxiety and depression can affect all families from different cultures, socio-economic classes and situations. Dependant on your family circumstances or upbringing you may feel more or less able to discuss how you feel with those around you. Previous experience of mental health problems may make you more at risk. However, this might also mean that you have developed and learned some helpful coping strategies already. If you have had additional stress such as going through IVF, surrogacy, using a donor or experiencing relationship issues, this can also contribute to the possibility of developing symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Some examples of issues or worries:



Feeding issues or choices



Work life balance - whether to work, when to go back



Finances or housing issues



Relationships - current or past



Childcare - nursery versus family or childminder



Other children's needs – wider family health and wellbeing



Discrimination or equality issues – in workplace, family or society



Health – yours and your babies and partner's health

Mood changes

Having a baby can bring difficulties such as tiredness, irritability, or poor appetite, but these changes don't necessarily cause a concern. However, if symptoms are more noticeable you may have the baby blues.



The Baby Blues

During the first week after having a child many women can experience low mood which is often described as the 'baby blues'. This can be a confusing experience as you often expect to feel happy after having a baby, but due to chemical and hormonal changes this is very common and can last for a few days. Symptoms include feeling low in mood, irritable, emotional or crying for no reason or feeling anxious and restless.

Post-natal Depression

Postnatal depression can occur 2-8 weeks after birth, although sometimes it can be up to a year or longer after the baby is born that symptoms appear.

Many people won't tell anyone how they feel, and keep it to themselves, worrying about either what others would think, stigma or that others will think they are an unfit parent. Between 10-15% of new mothers are thought to experience post natal depression (PND).

Symptoms of postnatal depression

You may experience some or all of these symptoms:

- Depressed
- Irritable
- Tired
- Sleepless
- Appetite changes
- Unable to enjoy anything
- Loss of interest in sex
- Negative and guilty thoughts
- Anxious
- Avoid other people
- Hopeless
- Thoughts of suicide or self harm
- Psychotic symptoms (small number of women with severe depression)

Dads, Partners and Non-Biological Parents

Becoming a new Dad can also trigger hormonal changes and one in ten men can experience mental health issues in the first 6 months after a baby arrives. Lack of sleep and broken routine can contribute to this. Attention can sometimes be so focussed on Mums, that Dads or partners don't feel as supported.

Post adoption can also bring similar characteristics of post-natal depression, about a month after a baby or child being placed with you. This will include a feeling of anxiety and panic or feeling overwhelmed by responsibility as well as physical and emotional symptoms of depression.

Also, if you are separated or co-parenting in different homes or don't have regular or consistent contact this can bring further challenges.

Partners, non-biological parents, or LGBT+ parents may also experience uncomfortable questioning, assumptions or insensitivity from friends, family and professionals. This can mean it can be harder to access or feel comfortable accessing supports.

Anxiety

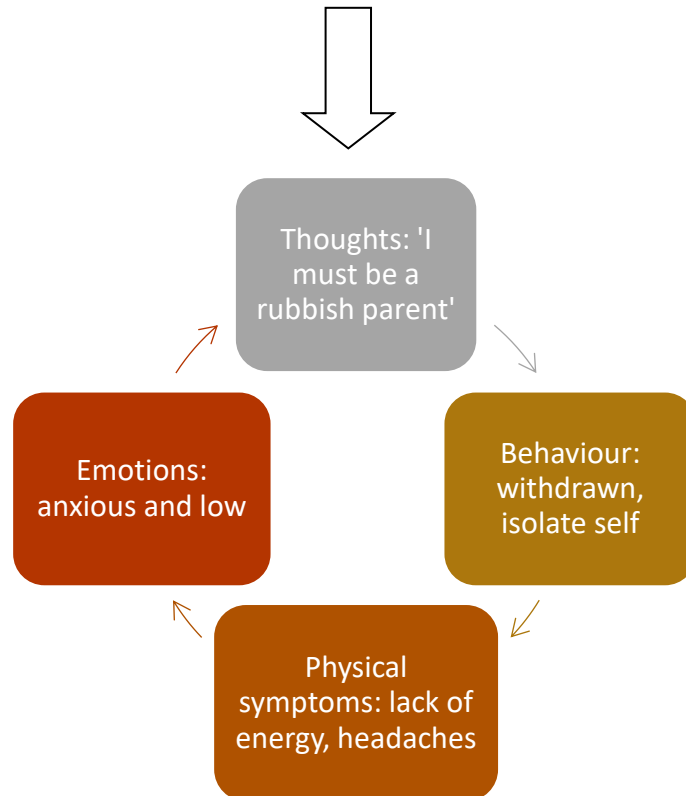
Becoming a new parent can also increase your level of anxiety, whether or not you were anxious before. You may worry about your child, their health or whether you are doing things 'right'. Also, you may feel judged by others or compare yourself to other parents.



A variety of triggers or situations may lead to a cycle of anxious thinking and behaviours. You may see other new parents apparently managing well or misinterpret for example a comment about how you are coping as a new parent or react to a comment about your baby. You may have anxious thoughts about parenting, relationships or feel guilt for feeling low or not good enough, at a time that you feel the expectation should be to be happy and fulfilled. Anxious thoughts can affect your behaviour and emotions and interpretation of situations as shown in the following example.

Situation

A parent feeling anxious and not 'good enough' may have negative thoughts and compare them self to other parents which can result in a cycle such as this.



If you notice you are having these types of thoughts it can be helpful to speak to someone else about it. Techniques can help such as trying to stop and think to yourself:

- 'you're doing a good job'
- 'what would my friend or partner say if they knew I was thinking this?'
- 'will it matter in 6 months or a year?'



Or you could write your thoughts down on a piece of paper or on your phone. If you are going to do this though try not to do it just before bed so it's not the last thing on your mind. This can help you to rationalise your thoughts or just get it off your chest and try to develop more helpful thoughts. It is important to try to manage your thoughts so they don't get out of control. Trying to challenge your thinking and looking for small positives or achievements can help build up your confidence and avoid comparing yourself to others.

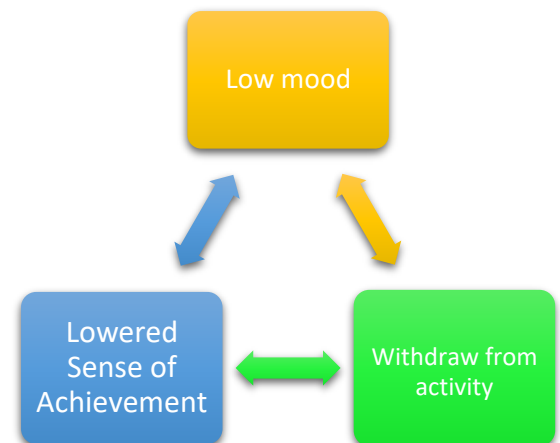
You will also find that taking the opportunity for relaxation and mindfulness can also help, and only needs to be brief such as just before bed for 5 minutes. See our separate information leaflets on thought challenging and relaxation for more information.

Low Mood

There are some things that can be helpful when experiencing low mood including activity scheduling. When feeling low this often impacts on what you do and you may withdraw from activities which can lead to a lowered sense of achievement resulting in a cycle as shown below. You may end up missing out on the benefits of doing things such as going out, seeing friends or exercising.



What you spend your time doing will have changed becoming a parent, and your sense of identity shifted. This is a journey and can take some longer to adjust to and adapt to this new identity. This may be more difficult for some people, as your time is taken up with caring for your baby and you are less likely to be able to do the things you previously enjoyed. Therefore it is important to consider what helps your mood. There may be some activities you can do with your baby which is important for bonding, but if possible some 'me time' can be helpful if you can ask someone else such as your partner to look after your baby.



Planning pleasurable activities is recommended to help with low mood, lowered productivity and loss of pleasure. Activity scheduling is a way of helping to structure your day or week with activities. Doing something small each day can also help you feel a sense of achievement.

Activity or self-care examples:

- Time to yourself such as having a long bath or watching something on TV
- Going for a walk or a run
- Telephoning, face timing or meeting a friend or family member
- Doing an activity you get pleasure from such as music, reading, drawing, gaming or gardening
- Meeting up with or connecting with other new parents
- Doing an online exercise class or yoga class

Goal Planning

If you are struggling to come up with a plan it may be helpful to use a structure such as this to help you plan what to do and remember to make it achievable.



Relationships and Communication

Having a baby and the associated changes can bring challenges to relationships. Communication may become tricky with your partner due to the pressure you both feel and if you are experiencing low mood or anxiety. You may interpret what your partner says or does as them not caring about you or make assumptions, so it is good to be aware and address this. If you need a break or some time out, it is important that you let your partner know, or if you are on your own ask close friends or family for help. If you don't, this can build up resentment as the other person isn't able to read your mind and result in you becoming more stressed. However they may pick up on non-verbal cues.

Communication is a two-way process that involves both expressing yourself and being receptive or listening to the other person. It is helpful to consider what kind of communication style you have, but try to use an assertiveness communication style. This is the ability to be able to express thoughts, emotions, beliefs and needs both clearly and honestly whilst respecting both yourself and the rights of others. Paraphrasing is a way of showing you are listening and checking that you understand your partner. Listen to what the other person is saying and rephrase in a tentative and questioning way e.g. 'I think you're saying that...' or check if that was what they had meant. Being prepared for what you want to say can be helpful.

Attachment - bonding with your baby

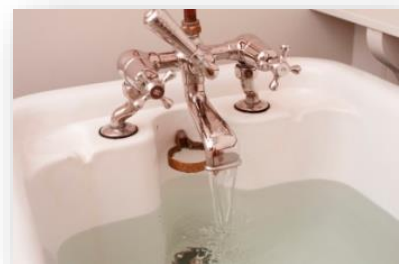
Your attachment with your baby will help them to feel safe and secure and help them in future develop safe and healthy relationships. This is known as secure attachment. Spending time with your baby getting to know them helps this process. You can attach with your baby through smiling and comforting them as well as talking to them and commenting on the world around you. Bonding is a two way relationship that can be more difficult if you are feeling low or anxious. However, simply talking to your baby or playing games such as peek-a-boo or reading baby books or telling stories can all help with bonding. Try to relax and be present when with your baby and put your worries aside and enjoy these times. If you have other children consider how to involve them, and if possible set time to have quality time with them if someone else is able to care for your baby or when your baby is content or sleeping.



Looking after yourself:

Self – care

There are many ways that you can look after yourself. When you have a baby you can be so focussed on them and their needs that you forget to look after yourself. Your baby and family will also benefit from you taking care of yourself – there are many ways to do this such as a balance of exercise and rest, a good diet and sleep. Making time for yourself or planning activities is important, as discussed previously under low mood and activity scheduling. Remember to be kind to yourself and take one day at a time. When feeling stressed, relaxation has many benefits so it's important to make it a priority even if it's for five minutes or half an hour.



Sleep

Sleep can be a challenge with a newborn in the first year(s) of having a baby, especially in the first few months. As your baby gets bigger, a routine if possible for your baby can also help with your own sleep. In the early days if your baby is napping during the day take the opportunity for a rest and put your feet up. If you need advice on your baby's sleep speak to your health visitor or check out the Baby Club website for tips. Night time can be difficult if you are feeding your baby through the night but remember this won't be forever. Seek help from your partner if there are two of you and try to take things in turn to spread the load. Finding what works for you is best as not everyone has the same needs or responsibilities, and some people can manage better than others without as much sleep.

Exercise

If you enjoyed the gym or fitness prior to becoming a parent this may not be possible now but you will find that you exercise in different ways. Whether walking with the pram or just generally looking after your child can mean you are busy getting up and down whilst taking care of them. If possible try to go out for a short walk whilst someone else is looking after your baby. This can also be good for your mental health and give you a bit of time out if possible. Walking or exercising with a friend may also be good way of getting a chance to talk to someone, even if it's whilst taking your baby out.

Healthy Eating

Having a new baby can get in the way of you eating properly due to tiredness and just snacking and not eating proper meals. However, it's important to drink plenty of water and eat well to ensure you're getting enough calories to give you the energy you need. Planning ahead where possible can help or buying food that you can snack on without much preparation.

Support network

If you have any concerns don't hesitate to use the support of those around you, whether it's professional help or help from friends and family.

- Workplace – if you work ask about more flexible working hours – speak to employer about this
- Childcare - ask for or arrange for support if needing a break
- Emotional support – speak to someone and share how you are feeling as it's often good to share how you feel with someone else
- Parent groups - connect with other parents online if face to face not available
- Practical help – help with meals, bedtimes
- Tell others if you are struggling – your GP or health visitor may be able to help or suggest other supports available

See our other information leaflets if you want more information on:

- Low Mood
- Worry
- Thought Challenging
- Communication
- Mindfulness
- Relaxation

If you wish to explore this topic further, you can register to do our Parenting and Mental Health Course available through our website.






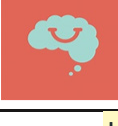
Resources

- Free online parenting course for parents and carers of children aged 0 to 19 to help parents and carers understand their child's development, support them emotionally and improve their relationship. For more details and to sign up visit <https://inourplace.heiapply.com/online-learning/> and use the code 'tartan' to gain free access.
- Tom Allan Centre 0141 221 3003 bluebell@crossreach.org.uk Bluebell Perinatal Depression Counselling Service is a specialist Postnatal Depression Service for depression which begins in pregnancy or shortly after birth.
- One Parent Families Scotland www.opfs.org.uk for support and advice. Lone Parents Helpline 08088010323 email helpline@opfs.org.uk
- Parent Club Scotland www.parentclub.scot
- Fathers network Scotland www.Fathersnetwork.org.uk/
- Children 1st Parentline <https://www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/> Free helpline 08000 28 22 33 Mon-Fri, 9am to 9pm, Sat-Sun, 9am to noon
- PaNDAS Support Group Leaders for parents affected by perinatal mental illness. Free helpline Monday – Sunday 11am to 10pm. 08081961776 and e-mail support service Info@pandasfoundation.org.uk
- Relationships Scotland – www.relationships-scotland.org.uk provides relationship counselling family mediation and other family support, 0345 119 2020 Monday to Friday 9.30 – 4.30pm
- Home Start Glasgow www.homestartglasgowsouth.org.uk family support charity based in the South of Glasgow

Our recommended resources (click for direct access):

NHS Inform	Offers the most up-to-date advice on dealing varying mental health difficulties, including the 5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing. Please visit: NHS Inform
Wellbeing	Our website offers a variety of self-help materials, groups, and courses for all sorts of problems that you may be facing. Anyone can download the self- help materials. Please visit: Wellbeing Website Glasgow
Mental Health Foundation	A range of content designed to give you more information about mental health and to help you to look after your mental health. Please visit: Your Mental Health - Mental Health Foundation
NHS Every Mind Matters	Interactive website providing you the opportunity to complete a short quiz which creates a Mind Plan of what you can do to improve your mental health. Please visit: Every Mind Matters
Psych Central	Run by mental health professionals offering reliable, trusted information to individuals struggling with a mental health. There is also an excellent quiz section allowing you to find out more about your symptoms and how to manage these. Please visit: PsychCentral for Mental Health
MIND	Information hub provides advice on how to support your mental wellbeing. Please visit: MIND Information Hub
SAMH	Hub of information and guidance about looking after mental health. Please visit: SAMH Guidance for Mental Health

Useful Apps:

	Mind Shift	Rather than trying to avoid anxious feelings, Mind Shift stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. It can encourage you to take charge of your life, ride out intense emotions, and face challenging situations
	SAM	SAM might be perfect for you if you're interested in self-help, but meditation isn't your thing. Users are prompted to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows you to track anxious thoughts and behaviour over time and learn 25 different self-help techniques.
	Happify	Need a happy fix? With its psychologist-approved mood-training program, the Happify app is your fast-track to a good mood. Try various engaging games, activity suggestions, gratitude prompts and more to train your brain as if it were a muscle, to overcome negative thoughts
	Headspace	The Headspace app makes meditation simple. Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on everything from stress and anxiety to sleep and focus.
	Calm	Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.
	Smiling Mind	Smiling mind is a way to practice daily meditation and mindfulness exercises from any device. This is helpful during times of stress and is a fun and unique way to help you put a smile on your mind.

Having suicidal thoughts? Discuss with a loved one, call Samaritans on **116 123** or access your **G.P. or Crisis Service via NHS on 111.**