

Sleep and settling for early childhood

Factsheet 14: Self-care and support for parents and caregivers



Summary

- Self-care strategies are activities and thoughts that help you stay in good physical and mental health. Practice self-care at any time, including when your child is sleeping or when they are being cared for by a trusted friend or family member.
- The birth of a baby is a special time, it can enhance and strengthen the bond between parents and caregivers. However, having young children can often bring up different emotions and relationship challenges for parents and caregivers.
- There are lots of supports out there to help dads take care of themselves, understand their role, relationship changes and bonding with their baby.
- One in six mothers and one in 10 fathers experience postnatal depression, and one in five women experience postnatal anxiety in the first year after the birth of their baby.
- There are some helpful things you can do to reduce your chance of getting postnatal depression.
- If you are experiencing anxiety and depression you are not alone. You should talk to your maternal and child health nurse or your doctor as soon as possible. You can also contact a mental health service for support.

Self-care strategies

Early childhood is a very exciting, happy and rewarding time of life. However, it can sometimes be stressful, exhausting and worrying. Having young children can often bring up different emotions and challenges for parents and caregivers.

It may seem like all of your energy is focused on your child, and you can forget to look after yourself. Even if you may not seem to have the time, it's important to take care of you. If you are happy and healthy you will be able to be a better mother, father or partner. We sometimes call this self-care and there are many different strategies you can use to help you stay in good physical and mental health. You can do self-care at any time, such as when your child is sleeping or when they are being cared for by a trusted friend or family member.

Don't think of these strategies as a 'to-do' list – instead, they are practical things you can do to improve your wellbeing. Here are some activities that you may find helpful.

Table 1: Self-care strategies and activities

Strategy	Activities
How to get enough sleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go to bed at the same time each day• Avoid exercise before bed• Make the bedroom as restful an environment as possible• Avoid screen time or other stimulating activities just before bed• Avoid caffeine or other stimulants in the evening

Strategy	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try a warm bath or shower two hours before bed to regulate your body temperature for sleep • Avoid a nap in the evening • If you cannot sleep, get up and do something quiet in another room • Short 20-minute naps can improve alertness and help you make better decisions
Making time for physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set achievable goals depending on your personal circumstances, previous exercise history and physical recovery from the birth • Fresh air and sunshine can lift mood and boost vitamin D • Schedule exercise time in your day – for example, take a short walk in the morning with your baby in the pram • Exercise can include gentler activities, such as breathing exercises, meditation or yoga • Physiotherapists can help with assessment, treatment and strengthening exercises
Looking after your dietary needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have small, protein-based snacks (such as yoghurt or nuts) on hand if you struggle to find time to prepare food during the day • Keep a bottle of water nearby as dehydration can make you feel irritable and tired • Set manageable goals for your family and allow for something easy like toasted sandwiches or eggs on toast on difficult days
Making friends and connecting with others	<p>New and existing social networks can help new parents feel connected to other adults. Some suggestions to maintain and develop social networks include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first-time parent groups • playgroups • free local activities, like story time at the local library • using social media, such as joining supportive Facebook communities.
Be kind to yourself	<p>It's important to be kind to yourself. It's ok to feel frustrated or scared sometimes. It can be helpful to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • write in a diary or journal • speak to your partner, a close friend or family member if you're able to • write a list of things you're grateful for or proud of every day.
Taking some time out	<p>Parents and caregivers need a break from caring from time to time. This also allows another person to have some one-on-one time with the baby. Suggestions for time out include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing a set time for an activity each week • doing an enjoyable hobby or craft • taking a relaxing bath. Generally, you'll get the most benefit from time out if the rest of the family is out of the house • going for a walk • going shopping • reading a book or magazine • watching a movie • catching up with friends • having a massage or pedicure.
Seeking support for your mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware and informed about common mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, that may occur when during pregnancy and after having a baby • Talk about your mental health concerns with family or friends if you're able to • Talk to your maternal and child health nurse call the MCH Line on Tel: 13 22 29 • Talk to your doctor or GP

Strategy	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call a helpline, such as Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA) or Parentline on Tel: 13 22 89. • Talk to a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or counsellor. There is a information on psychologist services on the Better Health Channel <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/maternal-and-child-health-services.>

Relationship support

Becoming a parent can enhance and strengthen the bond with your partner. However, it will bring new challenges.

Relationship issues can include:

- Difficulties adapting to parenthood, such as disagreements around traditional gender roles
- Society's expectations of mothers and fathers
- Division of household chores and child care
- A reduction in relationship equality, sex and intimacy
- An increased in conflict.

If you need relationship advice and support, there are organisations such as [Relationships Australia](https://www.relationships.org.au/) <https://www.relationships.org.au/> to help parents and caregivers to adapt to parenthood.

It can also be helpful to speak to your maternal and child health nurse, doctor or a relationship counsellor.

Support is available for dads

Parenting doesn't come easy for most of us and many dads can find becoming a new parent challenging. You are adjusting to a new role as a father, your relationship has changed, and it may be hard to communicate or find some intimacy with your partner with the arrival of a new little person. You also may not know how to bond with your new baby. The following organisations can help dads:

- Relationship Australia has put together a number of resources for fathers. These resources focus on the role of dads, the relationship between dad and their partner and the bond between dad and his child. More information can be found on [Support for Fathers](http://supportforfathers.com.au/resources/) <http://supportforfathers.com.au/resources/>.
- The Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE) has developed a e-Guide for expectant and new dads. The Ready to COPE Guide for dads provides timely and relevant information and support throughout pregnancy and the first year. To sign up for this Guide go to [COPE website](https://www.cope.org.au/readytocope/) <https://www.cope.org.au/readytocope/>.
- The Raising Children's website also has information specifically for dads, from pregnancy through to the birth and growth of your baby. For more information go to the [Raising Children website](https://raisingchildren.net.au) <https://raisingchildren.net.au>.
- Beyond Blue has information on their website to help dads transition to parenthood. It is important that dads take care of their own health and wellbeing, go to [healthy dads](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/about-our-work/our-work-with-men/healthy-dads) on Beyond Blue's website for more information <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/about-our-work/our-work-with-men/healthy-dads>.

Postnatal mental health

Some mothers experience anxiety and depression after the birth of their baby. Fathers and non-birth parents are also at risk, particularly if their partner has a mental health condition.

One in six mothers and one in 10 fathers experience postnatal depression, and one in five women experience postnatal anxiety in the first year after the birth of their baby.

If you are experiencing anxiety and depression you are not alone. Talk to your maternal and child health nurse or doctor as soon as possible or contact the mental health services listed in this factsheet.

Reducing your risk of postnatal depression

Some factors may reduce your risk of postnatal depression, include:

- Having strong support networks, including family, friends, community, connections with other new parents such as first-time parent groups
- Having a positive sense of identity and cultural heritage
- Being physically healthy and able to take care of yourself, including exercising, eating well and reducing stress where possible
- Having a friend or relative you can call or share your experiences with
- Having good problem-solving skills
- Being optimistic – a belief that life has meaning and hope
- Having a positive attitude to seeking support
- Access to support services.

Postnatal depression risk factors

It is not known exactly what causes postnatal depression, but you may be more at risk if you have:

- A personal or family history of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety
- Increased current life stresses, for example moving to a new house, relationship difficulties or having a baby with special care needs
- A lack of practical, social or emotional support
- Alcohol and drug misuse
- A history of abuse (physical, sexual or emotional)
- An anxious or perfectionist personality.

Common postnatal mental health conditions

The following table outlines some common postnatal mental health conditions that can be experienced by parents and caregivers, but there are also many other symptoms not listed here:

Table 2: Common postnatal mental health conditions and their symptoms

Condition	Signs and symptoms
<p>Baby blues is a common emotional response experienced in the first few days after the birth of a baby.</p> <p>Around 80 per cent of women experience baby blues.</p> <p>It usually disappears within a few days without treatment.</p> <p>If these symptoms do not go away, it could be a sign of a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being teary• Irritability• Being overly sensitive• Fatigue• Frequent mood changes
<p>Postnatal depression can develop after the birth of your baby and up to one year.</p> <p>It usually happens due to a combination of factors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low self-esteem and lack of confidence• Feeling inadequate or guilty• Negative thoughts• Feeling that life is meaningless• Feeling unable to cope• Feeling tearful or irritable• Difficulty sleeping or changes in sleeping patterns

Condition	Signs and symptoms
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low sex drive • Difficulty concentrating or remembering things • Loss or changes in appetite
<p>Perinatal and postnatal anxiety can develop after the birth of your baby.</p> <p>Anxiety is a broad term for conditions that have a number of common symptoms.</p> <p>Postnatal anxiety and depression are commonly experienced together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of fear and worry that ‘take over’ your thinking • Feeling irritable, restless, tense or constantly on edge • Racing heart / strong palpitations, including panic attacks • Reoccurring worrying thoughts, for example you’re not doing things right or something terrible will happen • Unable to sleep, even when you have the opportunity • Avoiding situations because you’re afraid something bad will happen

Other mental health conditions

As well as the common mental health conditions outlined, some women might experience other more serious mental health conditions either during pregnancy or after the birth of their child.

A previous mental health history or the presence of risk factors may result in a greater risk of having, relapsing or exacerbating a mental health condition. These risk factors include life stressors (family violence, loss or disability), multiple trauma or isolation (by distance or culture).

This can lead to an increase risk of severe mental health illness, such as psychotic disorders, like schizophrenia, postpartum psychosis and bipolar disorder during the pregnancy or after the birth.

Where to get mental health support

Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA)

[Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia \(PANDA\)](https://www.panda.org.au/) <<https://www.panda.org.au/>> is a well-known and reputable source of information.

PANDA offers a free telephone counselling from 9.00 am to 7.30 pm, Monday to Friday. Phone 1300 726 306.

Visit the website for checklists, fact sheets and information translated into five languages other than English.

PANDA also suggests these options to seek help:

- maternal and child health nurse or the MCH line
- doctor (to enable access to the mental health plan if required)
- midwife or obstetrician
- early parenting centres
- relationship counsellors
- mother–baby units
- MindMum – an app designed to help the emotional wellbeing of expecting and new mothers
- MumMoodBooster – a free online treatment program for postnatal anxiety and depression based on cognitive behavioural therapy. You can do this program at own pace, and you do not need a diagnosis to access it
- community-based playgroups and support groups
- emergency department, if urgent support is required.

Centre of Perinatal Excellence (CoPE)

The [Centre of Perinatal Excellence \(CoPE\)](https://www.cope.org.au/) <<https://www.cope.org.au/>> provides in-depth information on a range of emotional and mental health challenges faced by parents in pregnancy, birth and postnatal periods.

CoPE also provides the latest evidence for identifying, treating and managing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and other severe mental health disorders.

The site has resources for parents and caregivers experiencing mental health conditions, such as factsheets on symptoms and where and when to access support and treatment.

Resources include:

- CoPE [factsheets](https://www.cope.org.au/new-parents/postnatal-mental-health-conditions/postnatal-mental-health-factsheets-resources/) for women and their families < <https://www.cope.org.au/new-parents/postnatal-mental-health-conditions/postnatal-mental-health-factsheets-resources/>>
- CoPE [factsheets](https://www.cope.org.au/health-professionals/perinatal-mental-health-factsheets-for-professionals/) for health professionals < <https://www.cope.org.au/health-professionals/perinatal-mental-health-factsheets-for-professionals/>>

beyondblue

[beyondblue](https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents) <<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents>> provides information relating to pregnancy and parenting, covering topics from bonding with your baby, to spotting the signs of anxiety and depression.

Information topics include:

- becoming a parent – what to expect
- maternal mental health and wellbeing
- advice – for new and expectant dads
- ‘Just speak up’, a forum for sharing personal stories about postnatal anxiety and depression
- [‘Mental health checklist for mums’](https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/maternal-mental-health-and-wellbeing/mental-health-checklist-for-mums) <<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/maternal-mental-health-and-wellbeing/mental-health-checklist-for-mums>>, a checklist to help you find out whether you might be experiencing postnatal anxiety and depression.

Clinical mental health treatment for mothers

The Perinatal Emotional Health Program provides treatment for women at risk of or experiencing mental illness in the perinatal period. The perinatal period is from pregnancy until the end of the first year after birth. As the impact of perinatal mental illness extends beyond the woman herself, the treatment is for the family.

Six health services across in Victoria also have Parent Infant units where multidisciplinary care for women with serious mental illness during the perinatal period can receive clinical treatment in a residential setting. A team of highly trained staff provides care for you and your baby under the direction of a psychiatrist.

Your doctor or Maternal Child and Health Nurse can refer you to a Perinatal Emotional Health Program or the Parent Infant Units. These services are also accessible through the mental health triage service <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealthservices/adult/index.htm>. Each public mental health service in Victoria provides a psychiatric triage and referral service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To receive this form in an accessible format [email Maternal and Child Health and Parenting <MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au>](mailto:MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au).

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Available at the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>

This factsheet is based on research undertaken by KPMG on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services. The research included a comprehensive overview of contemporary research and evidence-based approaches and interventions for sleep and settling in early childhood. It considered developmentally appropriate strategies and cultural diversity. Download the full research report from the [MCH Service webpage](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health) <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health>>.