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# MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH

A handbook for health workers



**Perinatal Mental Health Project**  
Caring for mothers. Caring for the future.

A project of the Alan J Flisher Centre for Public Mental Health  
at the University of Cape Town



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Caring for mothers. Caring for the future.

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# Foreword

The Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP) provides training to health workers and community-based workers involved in caring for mothers. This handbook is intended as a supplement to this training programme and as a resource to anyone involved with mothers and mothers-to-be.

The handbook should be used in an active way: use it and add to it as best suits your local setting. The intended outcome of this handbook is to improve the quality of service offered to women in emotional distress and to meet the needs of maternal health workers, like you, who want to be better equipped in this task.

The handbook covers a range of topics. Each chapter has a clear set of learning objectives and a summary. Some chapters include practical activities which should help with linking the theory with your practice.

**Chapter 1** provides an overview of maternal mental illness, and explains why it is an important issue for health workers.

**Chapter 2** explains why the perinatal period is a crucial time in a mother's life and highlights the importance of the relationship between you and the mothers in your care.

**Chapter 3** helps you understand what mental illness is and the common types of mental illnesses which can present during the perinatal period.

**Chapter 4** outlines why pregnant women should be screened for mental illness and gives tips on how to screen.

**Chapter 5** highlights several practical tips for making referrals and what you can do when these are not possible.

**Chapter 6** gives an overview of treatment options, such as counselling, for women who are experiencing mental health problems.

**Chapter 7** provides an overview of special issues that health workers should think about when caring for mothers with particular needs.

The **Resources** section includes several resources that you may find useful while working with mothers.

## Background to maternal mental illness in South Africa

In this handbook, the 'perinatal period' refers to the period from pregnancy, through labour, up to one year after birth. Pregnancy is a difficult time for many women, and those with the most need for mental health care often have the least access to it. Also, during this time, both mental illness and poverty impacts on the woman, the foetus or infant, the family and the wider community. Maternal and mental health services need to begin to address this serious public health problem.

Women access health services for their maternal care during the perinatal period. This presents an opportunity to provide care for women in mental distress. By getting involved at this early stage, preventive work, involving screening and counselling, can be done. This could help women, their children and society in general.

## About the Perinatal Mental Health Project

The PMHP was started in 2002 to address the high rates of mental distress among pregnant women and mothers living in difficult situations. The Project began at the Liesbeeck Midwife Obstetric Unit at Mowbray Maternity Hospital in Cape Town, and now also operates at three other Midwife Obstetric Units. The service includes three main components: screening, counselling, and psychiatry. These are provided free of charge and integrated into the maternity clinic. The PMHP also provides training for health workers and community workers, conducts research to help improve service delivery, and is involved in advocacy work.

The PMHP believes that 'caring for mothers is caring for the future'. Recognising the need for public maternal mental health services, it is the PMHP's vision for all women to have access to quality maternal mental health care, integrated into regular maternity services. To achieve this vision, the PMHP partners with the Department of Health and works with civil society, international organisations and academic institutions to implement its four inter-related programmes. These programmes form an innovative model for integrated mental health services.

PMHP's long-term objective is to provide a model of maternal mental health, with effective tools and strategies, to partnerships and agencies capable of rolling out maternal mental health services nationally.



Simone Honikman  
Director

# Contents

Foreword	ii
Acknowledgements	vi
<b>1. <a href="#">Introduction</a></b>	<b>1</b>
<hr/>	
1.1 Why is it important to focus on maternal mental health?	2
1.2 Risk factors linked to poor maternal mental health	4
1.3 Summary	6
<b>2. <a href="#">Maternal care: A relationship between you and the mother</a></b>	<b>9</b>
<hr/>	
2.1 The mother and the perinatal period: a time of change	10
2.2 Why is your relationship with the mother so important?	10
2.3 The emotional state of women in your care	12
2.4 The emotional state of the health worker	20
2.5 A journey through 'secret histories'	25
2.6 Summary	30
<b>3. <a href="#">Maternal mental illness</a></b>	<b>33</b>
<hr/>	
3.1 Why is mental illness often overlooked?	34
3.2 Types of mental illness	35
3.3 Signs and symptoms of maternal mental illness and distress	43
3.4 Why is an early diagnosis so important?	48
3.5 How can you help women with mental health problems?	48
3.6 Summary	49
<b>4. <a href="#">Screening for maternal mental illness</a></b>	<b>51</b>
<hr/>	
4.1 Why screen pregnant women for mental illness?	52
4.2 The screening process	53
4.3 Screening tools	58
4.4 Summary	66

## **5. [How to refer a woman with mental health problems](#) 69**

---

5.1	Types of referrals	70
5.2	Practical issues	74
5.3	How to make a successful referral	76
5.4	When you cannot refer for counselling: some suggestions	79
5.5	Summary	82

## **6. [How to help women with mental health problems](#) 83**

---

6.1	What do women who experience mental distress need?	84
6.2	What is counselling?	86
6.3	Providing supportive care: sharing information	87
6.4	How to really 'listen'	87
6.5	What happens when someone is sent for professional counselling?	97
6.6	Speaking and being heard	99
6.7	Summary	102

## **7. [Special issues](#) 103**

---

7.1	Poverty	104
7.2	Lack of support	104
7.3	HIV status	105
7.4	Adolescent pregnancy	106
7.5	Being a refugee	107
7.6	Drug or alcohol misuse	108
7.7	Domestic violence and abuse	109
7.8	Child abuse	117
7.9	Suicide	122
7.10	Grieving and loss: miscarriage and stillbirth	127
7.11	Summary	132

## **8. [Resources](#) 135**

---

8.1	Screening tools	136
8.2	Maintenance Orders	150
8.3	Child Support Grants	152
8.4	Protection Orders	155
8.5	How to make a referral	160
8.6	South African national helplines	162

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