



# Perinatal Mental Health Project

Caring for Mothers. Caring for the Future.

## Wellness Booklet for Mothers



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### Perinatal Mental Health Project

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Alan J. Flisher Centre for  
Public Mental Health

Welcome to your wellness booklet! This booklet is for mothers who are pregnant or who have had their babies. If you take time to read and think about what is written here, it may help you to feel better, or keep you feeling well during this important time in your life. Remember that every pregnancy is unique, so you might feel different from how you felt during previous pregnancies or from other women.

Write your name here: .....

Having a baby can be very challenging. It is a time of great change and women and their partners/families need a lot of support during this time. Sometimes, due to past or current stressful situations, a mother can experience distress during or after her pregnancy. This can make it very difficult for her to care for herself and her baby.

We hope you will find this booklet useful!

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## Problems women may experience during and after pregnancy

Below are some things that can make pregnancy and caring for a baby very hard:

- Not having enough money or food, or a place to live
- Not having enough support and feeling lonely
- Having a baby when you are a teenager
- Not having a supportive partner
- Not having a supportive mother or family
- Having HIV/AIDS
- Conflict or violence with a partner or family member (physical, sexual, emotional, financial abuse)
- Being a refugee, asylum seeker or migrant worker
- Using alcohol or drugs or other unhealthy substances
- Having moved house recently or lost a job
- Experiencing the death of someone recently who was close to you
- Having a pregnancy that is not planned
- Having had a mental health problem in the past
- Conflict around cultural or religious issues
- Paternity problems (father of baby denying he is the father)
- Having experienced some kind of trauma in the past (rape, attack, abuse)





**After thinking about your situation, who do you think can help you? Write down their name/s:**

My strong, supportive relationships

.....

My birth companion

.....

Other people I can talk to

.....

.....

Depression and anxiety are common mental health problems that can affect anyone at any time. However, it is more likely for mothers to experience these problems during pregnancy and after the birth (sometimes for up to a year or more after the baby is born).

In fact, at least 1 out of 5 mothers are affected by depression and anxiety in South Africa.

**If you are a mother struggling with distress that makes it hard to cope, you can get help.** Remember:

- You are not alone!
- You are not to blame!
- You will get better!
- You can get help!

## Depression

Depression is a mental health problem when someone experiences feeling down or has a low mood lasting more than two weeks.



Depression in mothers may start before, during, or after childbirth. Often, depression is not recognised by a mother herself or the people around her. It may get worse if she does not get help. It may make the pregnancy harder or affect the relationship a woman has with her baby, partner or other children.

Depression involves one's body, mood, and thoughts. It can affect the way you eat, sleep, think, behave and feel about yourself or those around you.

## Some common signs of depression:

- Low mood and/or feeling numb or having no feelings
- Feeling guilty, like a failure, ashamed, worthless, hopeless, empty, or sad
- Often feeling close to tears, or crying often
- Feeling angry or irritable
- Fear for the baby and/or fear of being alone with the baby
- Fear of being alone or going out
- Feelings of guilt or hopelessness or helplessness
- Loss of interest in things that you would normally enjoy
- Not being able to fall asleep or get back to sleep after night feeds, sleeping too much, or having nightmares
- Not eating or eating too much
- Headaches and lowered resistance to viruses
- Feeling unmotivated or unable to cope with the daily routine
- Decreased energy and feeling exhausted/tired
- Having trouble thinking clearly or making decisions, poor memory, poor concentration
- 'Thinking too much' or worrying
- Loss of sex drive
- Having thoughts about harming yourself or your baby, ending your life, or wanting to escape and get away from everything.

Most people will experience most of these symptoms from time to time. They may be a sign of ordinary distress. But, a person may be depressed if she has many of these symptoms for more than two weeks and if she is struggling to cope with daily life.

## Depression and HIV and AIDS

It is important to get tested for HIV/AIDS during your antenatal visits at the clinic. If you have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS it is normal to feel scared, sad, and angry. These feelings, however, could increase your chances of developing depression. It is important to know that if you have become HIV/AIDS positive and are suffering with depression, **you can and should get treatment for the depression as well.** This can change the risks for your baby and set him/her on a healthy course.

Counselling can help you to deal with the many issues that can come up at this time. Ask to speak to an HIV counsellor or mental health counsellor.



Depression can be treated! See some of the options for treatments that can work for both depression and anxiety on page 7.



## Anxiety

It is normal for you to feel some worry or scared feelings during your pregnancy. However, too much anxiety and distress could affect the way that you feel about your pregnancy in a negative way.

Anxiety is a mental health problem which causes an unusual and overwhelming feeling of tension, or too much thinking and worrying that occurs on most days. It negatively affects your daily activities. There are a few types of anxiety conditions that are common during and after pregnancy. These include:

- a. **General Anxiety Disorder** – feeling anxious, tense, or worried on most days, for longer than six months. It may be hard to relax or fall asleep and you may experience light-headedness, shortness of breath, nausea, trembling, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, or sweating.
- b. **Panic Disorder** – frequent attacks of intense feelings of anxiety that seem like they cannot be brought under control; this may lead to avoiding certain situations (e.g. going into crowded places). Panic attack symptoms include fast beating heart, chest pains, struggling to breathe, dizziness, dry mouth, nausea, abdominal pain, sweating, numbness or tingling in fingers, trembling, and a fear of going crazy, dying, or having a heart attack or stroke.
- c. **Social Anxiety Disorder** – strong fear of criticism, being embarrassed or humiliated, even in everyday situations such as eating in public or talking to a neighbour.

- d. **Agoraphobia** – this happens when panic attacks cause people to stop doing their normal activities for fear they might have an attack – eg. going to crowded places, shops and using public transport. People’s lives can become so restricted that they may not leave their home.

## Treatment for Anxiety

Just like depression, anxiety before and after pregnancy is common and CAN be treated:

- The type of anxiety you are experiencing and how much it is affecting your life will help decide what the best treatment options are for you. Your counsellor, doctor or nurse will help you. A good start is to practice **deep breathing and relaxation exercises**. You will find a relaxation exercise on the next page.
- If you experience mild to moderate symptoms of anxiety, **counselling and emotional and practical support** can be very helpful. If possible, involve your family/partner in this process. Ask for the mental health counsellor/psychologist at your clinic or nearest day hospital. Check out our Resource Directory to find other options for getting help: [http://pmhp.za.org/wp-content/uploads/Resource-Directory\\_2016.pdf](http://pmhp.za.org/wp-content/uploads/Resource-Directory_2016.pdf)
- If your anxiety is more severe, you are more likely to need a treatment plan that includes **counselling and medication**. You can be referred to a psychiatrist or doctor who can prescribe these medications for you.

## Options for treating depression and anxiety

There are many options for managing depression and anxiety. It may help to **try more than one option** at the same time. If symptoms get worse after they get better, you should feel free to return to options that worked for you.

- **Counselling** is the process of talking to a trained counsellor in a private and confidential space about your problems, to get help with what you are facing. It is an effective treatment and your counsellor will be trained to help you through this time by focusing on ways you can improve your situation.



Ask for the mental health counsellor/psychologist at your clinic or nearest day hospital.

Check out our Resource Directory to find other options for getting help:

[http://pmhp.za.org/wp-content/uploads/Resource-Directory\\_2016.pdf](http://pmhp.za.org/wp-content/uploads/Resource-Directory_2016.pdf)

- In addition to counselling, **medication** (tablets) called anti-depressants can be used when depression or anxiety is more severe. Even during pregnancy and breastfeeding, certain anti-depressants can be taken safely without harming your baby. It is **important** to check with your doctor first, who will prescribe the best option for you.

- **Self-help techniques** may help you in this healing process. Here are some useful self-help tips:
  1. Understand what depression is – the more you know, the better you will respond. The people around you may also want to know more.
  2. Avoid short term ‘fixes’ such as the abuse of drugs and alcohol, or over-the-counter self-medication. These make things worse in the long term.
  3. Break big tasks into smaller ones, and do the small tasks you can manage each day.
  4. Try to be with other people who help you feel good and share how you feel as much as possible.
  5. Do not hide away and stay alone – do things that make you feel better like going for a walk or visiting a friend.
  6. Inform your family and friends about what is happening to you so that they can help and support you.
  7. Depression or anxiety changes thoughts and behaviour. With help and support you may be able to change your negative thinking to more positive thinking, which will make you feel better and lead to more helpful behaviour.
  8. See the relaxation exercises on the next page and the affirmations on page 13.
- **Support groups** can be a way to meet others who may have similar experiences, help with feelings of isolation, and provide you with a network of people where you can get useful information.

Support groups can run around different themes:  
breastfeeding, grief, divorce, depression, anxiety.

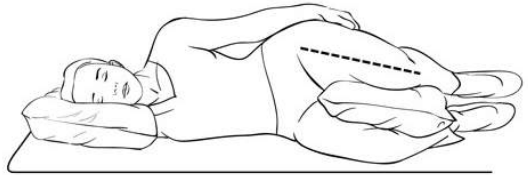
## Relaxation

Switch your phone onto silent and ask your family to give you 10 minutes of uninterrupted time. If you are interrupted, settle back into relaxing by taking 3 long deep breaths.

Sit comfortably with your back straight. Shoulders, arms, hands, tummy and face relaxed

Or

Lie down on your side with your head and top leg supported by pillows or blankets.



## Begin Relaxing

Feel the ground, chair or bed supporting you

- As you breathe out let go of any effort and give your full weight to being supported by the earth
- Notice the feeling of your breath moving in and out of your body, allowing your breath to be just as it is
- Continue feeling your breath for 8 breaths in and out
- If you get distracted by sounds, thoughts, ideas, images, gently return to feeling your breath
- Do this over and over again, keeping a gentle and kind attitude towards yourself
- You could say:
  - 'Distraction is normal and fine. I choose to come back to this moment by finding my way back to my breath'
  - 'Just for now I let go of trying hard or judging, and relax into how it is for me'
  - 'I am whole and good enough already when I connect to myself and allow myself to be'
  - 'I can begin again and again – each breath is a place to start'

*If you are pregnant, you can add this part of the relaxation:*

- Place your hands onto your belly and feel the breath moving here
- Take a few moments to connect with how your breath is supporting, cradling and rocking your baby
- Continue breathing with your baby, giving yourself permission to relax into this moment
- As you breathe in, direct love, kindness, calm or a smile towards your baby
- Breathe this feeling into your entire body, filling yourself and your baby with this



*If you have already had your baby, you can add this part of the relaxation:*

- Place your hands onto your belly and feel the breath moving here
- If your baby is sleeping next to you, you can cradle your baby and connect with how your breath is gently supporting, cradling and rocking your baby
- Continue breathing, giving yourself permission to relax into this moment
- As you breathe in, direct love, kindness, calm or a smile towards your baby (breathe this feeling into your entire body, filling yourself and your baby with this)

## Continue Relaxing

- As you breathe out let go of effort, tension, worry and anything else you don't need
- Repeat this for a few more breaths
- Now expand your attention to feeling your body supported and the sounds around you
- When you are ready, gently open your eyes
- If you have been lying down, slowly sit up
- Stretch your arms and legs to return movement to your body
- Find your way back to relaxing throughout the day by feeling your breath.

Well done, enjoy the feeling of relaxation. 😊

**You can practise a few relaxing breaths at other times as you go about your ordinary tasks, such as waiting for the kettle to boil, in the taxi or queue.**

## Affirmations

Affirmations are short, positive, powerful statements that we say to ourselves. We may be able to guide the way we think by telling ourselves things that are positive and help us feel better.

Here are some examples:

I am special and deserve love and respect.

I trust my body and I follow its lead.

I have a beautiful baby.

I willingly accept the help of others.

I am gentle with myself and others.



**Now add your own affirmations:**

.....

.....

.....

.....

**These are my counsellor's affirmations about me:**

.....

.....

.....

.....



## Connecting with your baby

As your pregnancy grows, you may start to wonder what your baby is doing in there! As you go about your daily activities, try to imagine what it must be like for your baby, in his/her fluid environment, inside you.



You may start to feel your baby's movements from about 18 - 20 weeks if this is your first baby, or even sooner if you have been pregnant before. What do you notice about her/his movements? What do you think she/he is doing? Is your baby kicking, punching, stretching, rolling or hiccupping? How does she/he respond when you touch your belly where she/he is moving?

Your baby will start to hear better between 23 - 27 weeks. Studies have shown that babies become more alert when their mothers speak. Talking, reading out loud and singing will help your baby get to know your voice.

Allow yourself to daydream about your baby. What do you imagine your baby will be like? What have you already learnt from how she/he moves inside you?

This journey is about getting to know each other.

## Getting to know your baby after birth

Every relationship between a mother and her baby is unique and special. You may or may not feel an instant bond with your baby.

Relationships take time to develop, and getting to know your baby as a unique individual with his/her own likes and dislikes, and personality traits, will help you to develop a strong bond over time.

- Is your baby active, liking to move a lot?
- Does your baby like people to touch him, or not?
- Is your baby easy-going or does she prefer the same routine?
- Does your baby make his feelings known loudly or quietly?
- Is your baby easy to soothe, or does it take time to settle her?
- Is your baby sensitive to noise and changes in the environment?

How does your baby react when you are feeling:

- Happy
- Upset
- Angry
- Stressed?



Notice how your baby responds and write here what you observe:

- When I cuddle my baby, she/he feels .....

.....

- When I talk to my baby, she/he feels .....

.....

- When I feel frustrated with my baby, she/he feels ....

.....

- When I feel sad or worried, my baby feels .....

.....

- When I feed my baby, she/he feels .....

.....

- When I play with my baby, she/he feels .....

.....

- When I am too tired to respond to my baby, she/he

feels .....

## Plan for help



This page is for writing down a **plan to help yourself** when you are feeling very upset or in crisis, and can't get to speak with your counsellor.

1. I can help myself to keep calm by breathing slowly in and out.

2. I can contact somebody I trust so I can talk to them:

..... Tel: .....

3. I can go to a place where I feel safe and comfortable.

.....

4. I can write down how I am feeling and why:

.....

.....

5. When I feel this way I can remind myself:

.....

6. I can:

.....

.....

## Useful contact numbers



The last page is for some **useful contact numbers**, and for any notes you may wish to make.

My birth companion's name .....

My birth companion's number .....

My counsellor's name .....

My counsellor's number .....

My antenatal clinic number .....

My day hospital number .....



## Contact

Perinatal Mental Health Project

Email: [info@pmhp.za.org](mailto:info@pmhp.za.org)

Phone: +27 (0) 21 689 8390

Fax: +27 (0) 86 648 2844

Web: [www.pmhp.za.org](http://www.pmhp.za.org)



<https://twitter.com/PMHPatUCT>



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