

How to refer a woman with mental health problems

This chapter highlights several practical tips for making referrals and what you can do when these are not possible.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter you will know:

- What steps to follow when you have identified that the mother has a mental health problem
- How to refer the mother to the services and support she needs in the most effective way
- What you can do for the mother if there are no referral services available

5.1 Types of referrals

You have screened the mother for mental health problems, have identified risk factors that might make her vulnerable for mental health problems, and noted symptoms of possible mental illness. Now you need to refer the mother to a service which can help her such as a:

- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Psychiatrist
- Non-governmental organisation

Referral is a very important part of mental health care, but can only be made if there are appropriate resources available. Later in this chapter, suggestions are given for supporting the mother if no referral services are available (See **Section 5.4**).



Definition: referral

Referral is the direction of a patient to another person, place or service for help or information. The word 'referral' is often used in medical settings. It is the act of recommending more specialised services to the mother.

There are different types of mental health resources available. These differ from place to place, so it is important to identify what is available in your community. There may be both governmental services and community-based services in your area. Below are examples of the types of services and resources which may be available.

Community mental health nurses

These nurses are usually based in clinics, community health centres or district hospitals. They often work together with psychologists and psychiatrists. They are also sometimes known as community psychiatric nurses. It may be useful to refer all mothers with psychotic features, suicidal plans or severe mental health symptoms that affect functioning.

Social workers

If the mother has a problem related to social issues, like accessing social grants, housing or other social services, you could refer her to the social worker at your facility or in your community. Social workers can also provide assistance with family issues, such as domestic abuse or adoption.



Emergency care

The mother's condition can be considered an emergency if:

- She is suicidal, or has thoughts about harming herself
- She has thoughts of harming others
- She is psychotic

Contact the community mental health or psychiatric nurse, or the doctor in your ward or facility. They will need to refer the mother to the nearest health facility offering psychiatric services.



In emergencies, it is very important that the mother is referred on the same day.

Support to families affected by substance misuse

If a woman or her partner misuses alcohol or drugs, she can get psychological support and information from special organisations that will deal with addiction problems (see **Chapter 8: Resources** for more information).

Other local resources

You need to look for organisations in your area which could be able to assist you. Non-governmental support services in your community may include:

- Religious organisations
- Income-generating groups or micro-finance lending schemes
- Support groups
- Treatment and rehabilitation centres
- Community care organisations
- Counselling centres
- Trauma services
- Shelters

In South Africa, some examples of social assistance are maintenance orders and the Child Support Grant.

Maintenance orders

If a woman's partner has left her, she can report him to the Maintenance Office for child support. There are Maintenance Officers at Magistrate's Courts who can help women apply for maintenance. They also deal with applications to increase or reduce maintenance payments.

If the partner denies paternity, he can be forced to take a paternity test. This is a complicated procedure, but it can be worth doing as it may provide some financial support for the mother. Below are some facts about maintenance orders in South Africa.

Child Support Grant

If a woman is the primary caregiver of a child (her own or someone else's child), she can apply for a Child Support Grant. Parents and primary caregivers do not have to pay school fees for children who are benefitting from a Child Support Grant. Details about these grants, as well as the process to follow to apply are available in the **Resources** section.

Other forms of government support

A woman can also apply for 'indigency status' at her Municipal Office. This can allow her to get assistance with the cost of water, electricity and property rates.

If a woman has applied for a grant, but has not yet received it, she can apply for urgent support. People in desperate need of support can apply for temporary assistance called 'Social Relief of Distress'. This is normally issued as a food parcel but can also be a voucher or cash payment. If a woman receives cash, this will be deducted from the grant money she eventually receives.

Note

Maintenance orders: facts

- Both parents have a legal duty to support their children.
- The parent who is looking after the child has a right to apply to the Maintenance Court for the other parent to contribute to the costs of parenting.
- If the child is not living with the mother or the father, the person who is looking after the child can also apply for maintenance from the parents. For example, if a child is living with the grandparents, the grandparents can apply to get maintenance from the father and the mother of the child.
- Once there is a court order instructing a parent to pay child support, it is a criminal offence not to pay.
- There are special Maintenance Courts at most Magistrate's Court.
- For details on how to apply for a Maintenance Order and what to do when payment is not made, go to the **Resources** section.



Tips

- Work together with your colleagues to draw up a list of useful organisations and resources in your area.
- Having a handy resource file in your clinic can make referrals more efficient.
- Remember to update your resource file over time!
- Making a personal contact with someone working at the resource organisation can be extremely useful.
- When you are able to provide the mother with options, it can help the mother in the long-term and make you feel a greater sense of job satisfaction.

5.2 Practical issues

You may encounter difficulties with setting up appointments for referral. For many reasons, women often **'default'** their appointments.



Definition: defaulting

Defaulting means that someone has stopped taking medication or has not attended an appointment, and so has lost the benefits of the treatment programme.

Practical obstacles

Many women affected by mental illness are often living in poverty or other difficult situations, which make it difficult to keep their appointments. For example, they may not have money for transport, they may not be able to get time off work, or they may not be able to arrange child care.

Myths and beliefs

Mothers may have certain beliefs about mental illness and its treatment, which can prevent them from taking up services. For instance, some women may be afraid that they will be judged as an unfit mother and have their baby taken away.

Stigma

Women may be scared to think and talk about their problems. They may worry that they will be seen as 'crazy'. Many people think that a person with mental health problems is stupid or weak in some way. There is also a common misunderstanding that people with mental illness do not get better. Health workers can play an important role in addressing stigma, both with their patients and with their co-workers.

Trust

Women may be concerned that the health worker or counsellor will tell other people about their problems. Creating a trusting environment and explaining confidentiality could help the mothers open up to you. Trust can also reduce the risk of mothers defaulting their appointments.

Depression and/or anxiety

Mental illnesses can impact on a woman's ability to keep her appointments. A mother may not be able to make the necessary arrangements to get to her appointment because of depression or anxiety:

- Decreases motivation
- Can make the mother feel that she is not worthy of getting help
- Can make practical and emotional tasks seem overwhelming
- Can make her forgetful

By taking care to set up a referral appointment properly, and by bearing in mind these practical issues, you give the mother the best chance of getting the help she needs (see section 5.3 for additional tips on making successful referrals).

5.3 How to make a successful referral ---

The aim of a good referral is:

- For the mother to receive good quality care
- To make the most of the time spent by you and the referral service

Tips for referral

Give information

Explain to the mother **why** she is being referred. She may be more accepting of your referral if you express concern for her well-being and the impact of her situation on her and her family.

Choose resources you know and trust

Your choice of the referral organisation or service makes all the difference. Make personal contact with a staff member there, and learn about what they do. This will make it easier for the mother and for you when you follow-up on her.

See what is feasible for the mother

Explore the mother's situation to work out whether she is **able** to use the referral:

- Will she go to the service or organisation you have suggested?
- Does the time and place suit her?
- What practical or emotional challenges could stop her from going to her appointment?
- Can she take time off work? Does she have transport money? Can she make child care arrangements?

Write a referral letter

Write a detailed referral letter and be sure to ask for a reply to you. Should the mother be referred to a counsellor, your referral letter should explain that the mother is experiencing mental distress or has symptoms of mental illness. If you don't have much time, write in bullet points. Put your name and contact number on the letter. See **Section 8.5** for an example of a referral letter.

Follow-up

Try to find out from the mother if she went to her appointment. If she did go, find out if the appointment was useful or not. If she was unable to keep her appointment, find out why. Try not to seem disapproving. You may need to make another referral, possibly to another place.

Have an open-door policy

You may feel frustrated when a mother defaults or refuses your referral – but it is important not to judge her, to be angry or to punish her.

It is important to keep an ‘open-door policy’. Quite often, at a later stage or in a crisis, the mother changes her mind and returns to a place or person where she felt supported. It is important that she has access to mental health care when she needs it. When a mother returns by choice, she is more likely to follow up on her appointments and treatment.

In the Resources section you can find an example of a Referral Letter and a Referral Evaluation Form. The Referral Letter template can be used as a model for letters that you send with the mother to the new service. The Referral Evaluation Form can be used when you have a follow-up appointment with the mother, after the referral.

Practical steps when referring for counselling

Counselling is covered in detail in Chapter 6. If you trust the quality of the counselling the mother will receive, you could describe what counselling will provide for her:

- If a woman is being referred during pregnancy, reassure her that it is a good thing to have the opportunity to talk to a counsellor before the baby is born, and that she will feel more prepared when the baby comes.
- Discuss what she expects to happen in a counselling session.
- Assure the mother that she will receive sensitive, supportive and reliable care.
- Explain that the counsellor will listen carefully to what she says, and will allow her to speak and express her feelings in her own words and in her own way.
- Explain that the counsellor will not express opinions, or give direct advice. ‘Patient-centred’ counselling allows the mother to understand her own feelings and improve her self-esteem. Then she can develop her own solutions and gain confidence in her ability to cope.
- Explain that a counsellor could be a link between crisis and coping.

A wide variety of problems can benefit from referral to counselling

In addition to mental distress, counselling can benefit the following problems:

Crisis or severe mental health symptoms

If the mother is in crisis or has had serious symptoms for a long time, you should refer her to a psychiatrist. If she refuses, try to refer her to a counsellor. It is very important for her to have at least one person she can trust and whom she can contact during a crisis.

Isolation and stress

If the mother is isolated and stressed but not in crisis, refer her to counselling. The counsellor can try to help her identify possible ways of coping, relaxing and getting support.

- Is there a friend or family member she trusts and feels that she can talk to?
- Is there a support group in her community? What other resources are there?

Severe anger

If the mother is feeling very angry, refer her to counselling. A counsellor can encourage her to write a letter to the person she is angry with, getting out all her feelings and the reasons for her anger. After she has written it, she can decide to send it or not. Sometimes, having the opportunity to express feelings can help her to feel less angry.

Abuse

If the mother was abused as a child, or is currently experiencing abuse, assure her that it is not her fault and refer her to counselling. Affirm her feelings. If she wants to talk about this more, support her to do so. If she does not, do not push her, remain supportive, and listen to what she wants to talk about.

5.4 When you cannot refer for counselling: some suggestions

What if you cannot refer the mother? This is a difficult situation, but there are other ways to assist a woman who is experiencing mental health problems.

Listen to the mother's story

Many women may feel isolated and have no support. The PMHP experience shows that having someone to talk to, even for a short time, has real and positive effects for women. While you are doing the booking procedures, taking the history and checking the physical health of the mother, you can listen to her story. Listening to the mother and showing empathy is one of the most important things you can do for her.

There is more information about empathy and listening in **Chapter 6**.

Note

Often, health workers don't ask women how they are feeling, because it takes too much time to listen properly to the answer or because they find it difficult to hear about other people's feelings and problems. However compassionate care does not need to take much more time than the routine engagement with the mother.

Set up a support group

Support groups provide a useful space for women to share their experiences and to learn about mental health issues or other pregnancy-related matters. Support groups help people feel less alone with their problems. Feeling supported is particularly important for the recovery of women suffering from a maternal mental illness.

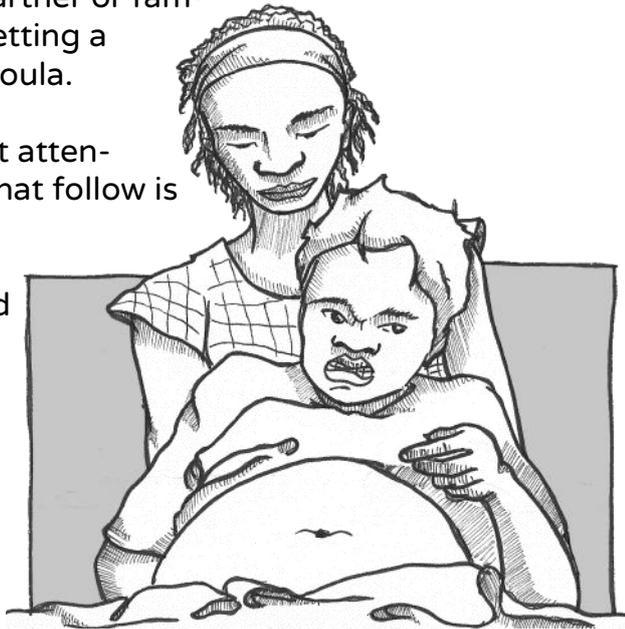
Read **Chapter 6** to find out more details about setting up a support group.

Help the mother to get a doula

If the mother is alone and has no partner or family support, you could help her in getting a birth companion, also known as a doula.

To have another woman in constant attendance during birth and the weeks that follow is an old practice with many benefits.

Traditionally, other women who had previously given birth would surround women in labour. These women would gather to support and encourage the labouring mother.



Definition: doula

The word *doula* comes from the Greek language and means ‘a woman who helps other women’.

A doula’s function is to care for and support the birthing mother. The doula offers emotional and physical support to the birthing woman, and also those who are with her during her labour.

A doula can:

- Encourage the birthing woman
- Help the woman focus on the fact that she is bringing a new life into the world, a powerful process
- Provide physical support, such as massaging the woman and helping her find comfortable positions for labour
- Give the birthing woman energy-sustaining foods and fluids
- Give on-going support from the first stages of labour at home, through the journey to the hospital, during labour and after the birth, until the baby has successfully breastfed and the whole family is settled

All mothers need to be able to trust the people around them during the birthing process.

The doula creates a safe environment where the mother feels protected and calm. A doula does not perform any medical tasks but actually can assist the medical birth team. The benefits of a doula during labour include:

- A positive effect on the mother: continuous support promotes the steady release of hormones which help the mother to feel calmer, more comfortable and experience less pain
- A lower chance of experiencing mental distress during labour or in the postnatal period
- A shorter labour
- Fewer forceps or vacuum deliveries, and fewer caesarean sections
- Less need for pain medication
- An increased chance and duration of successful breastfeeding

You could provide basic counselling

Professional counselling can only be given after training. Identifying a registered training organisation to equip you and your colleagues with professional counselling skills can enhance the care you can provide for women. This can also increase your own job satisfaction and enable you to care for your own psychological well-being.



Chapter 6 gives some guidelines on offering the mother basic counselling by listening to her and giving her information about pregnancy and birth.

5.5 Summary

- There are different types of mental health resources available. These differ from place to place, so it is important to identify what is available in your community. There may be both governmental services and community-based services in your area.
- In emergencies, it is very important that the mother is referred and assessed on the same day. Contact the community mental health or psychiatric nurse, or the doctor at your nearest facility.
- It is important to keep in mind that there may be many reasons for why women default their mental health appointments.
- In order to make a successful referral, it is necessary to give information to the mother, give her a choice, assess what is feasible for her, write a referral letter, follow-up if possible, and have an open-door policy so that she can come back.
- Referral to professional counselling can be beneficial for women who are in crisis or who have severe mental health symptoms but who refuse to be referred to a psychiatrist. Referral to counselling can also be beneficial for women who are isolated, stressed, extremely angry or who have experienced abuse.
- When you cannot refer, there are other options such as listening to the mother's story, setting up a support group, and/or helping the mother to identify a woman to support her through the birthing process, known as a doula.