

Parent Toolkit:

# PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH

# SELF-CARE: A PRIORITY IN THE TRANSITION TO MOTHERHOOD



**Why is there so little information provided to mothers on self-care as an important skill in coping during pregnancy and after the birth of their child? It seems we focus on nearly every other aspect of the experience, making sure to prepare with breathing techniques, bags packed, sleep preparations, feeding techniques, safety and yet....the mother's wellness and sense of peace are considered last, at best.**

Self-care is non-negotiable. It is an anchor during the transition to motherhood.” Self-care is a skill best learned prior to the birth of your child, although we are not all afforded this opportunity and our practice will certainly be altered after the baby arrives.

## **So what exactly is self-care?**

It is not a once a week soak in the bathtub or a monthly trip to the spa. It is not a “treat” that we provide to ourselves. Self-care is a daily routine of hygiene, where we attend to our needs. It is the balance of attending to our physical discomfort and emotional needs; it is learning to soothe ourselves and attend to stress as it arises, not as it explodes!

This may look like a cup of tea each morning, spending time stretching each evening, journaling about thoughts/feelings, taking time to talk with another mother, friend or family, or having a favorite dessert. No matter what your practice is, you must make space for it. Daily.

The key to effective self-care is the art of mindfulness. When we fully attend to our experience, we can transform our physical and mental state.

Motherhood is beautiful and it is also filled with demands, schedules, activities, chaos and an extension of our bodies to support the life of another human being (or several). The consequences of failing to attend to self-care are enormous. We cannot wait until our energy is fully depleted to attend to our needs. It is unkind and unwise. So please, take care Mama.

# REPRODUCTIVE MOOD DISORDERS

**Pregnancy and the postpartum period are both joyful and exhausting times for many women. Often accompanying this time are common feelings of fatigue, low energy, irritability, difficulty with sleep, strong emotional reactions, worry, hormonal and body changes.**

*\*While these symptoms are often a common experience of pregnancy and the postpartum period, they may also be a sign of depression or anxiety if they persist for more than a few weeks and interfere with daily functioning.*

## Baby Blues

After childbirth, a significant drop in hormones occurs (estrogen and progesterone), contributing to short-term mood changes. Additionally, hormones produced by your thyroid gland may decline sharply and may leave you feeling tired and sluggish. These symptoms may occur a few days up to 3 weeks postpartum. 50-85% of women experience these symptoms, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

**Symptoms may include mood swings, anxiety, sadness, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, tearfulness and crying, reduced concentration, appetite changes, and difficulty sleeping.**



# REPRODUCTIVE MOOD DISORDERS

- 1 Postpartum Depression:** A period of more than two weeks of symptoms occurring 4-8 weeks postpartum up to one year. Found in 10-15% of births according to UNC Center for Women's Mood Disorders and The American Psychological Association.

  - Symptoms may include sadness or frequent crying, intense anxiety, obsessions and ruminations, sleep disturbance, reduced concentration and appetite changes, suicidal thoughts, intense worry about baby's health, loss of interest in an enjoyable activity, irritability, reduced self-worth/confidence.
  
- 2 Postpartum Anxiety:** Can include Panic Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder, as well as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

  - Panic attacks: Sudden and intense rush of anxiety. Avoidance of places/activities where panic has occurred.
  - Compulsions: Repetitive behavior related to fear of something bad happening (i.e., checking baby's breathing, washing hands, checking blood pressure.)
  - Worry: Thoughts that feel uncontrollable and severe. Physical symptoms accompanying thoughts (i.e., headache, stomach ache, fatigue.)
  - Obsessions: Intrusive thoughts, images, or impulses that cause distress. May be related to health or baby, harming baby, sexual in nature.
  - Post-traumatic stress: Intrusive images or thoughts related to past trauma. Avoidance of reminders of trauma (people, places, things). Hyper-vigilance, feeling on edge, irritable.
  
- 3 Postpartum Psychosis:** Rare disorder, occurring in approximately 1 to 2 out of every 1,000 deliveries. Signs are typically seen within the first few weeks after delivery with more severity in symptoms.

  - Symptoms may include obsessive thoughts about the baby, hallucinations and delusions, severe sleep disturbance, feelings of paranoia, or attempts to harm self or baby. These symptoms often require immediate attention and can be a symptom of a severe mood disorder or Bipolar Disorder.
  
- 4 Bipolar Disorder, Peripartum Onset:** Periods of severely depressed mood and irritability and/or a rapid change in mood cycles.

  - Symptoms may include rapid speech, anxiety, irritability, little need for sleep, racing thoughts, trouble concentrating, continuous high energy, overconfidence, impulsiveness, poor judgment, distractability, grandiose thoughts, and inflated sense of self-importance, and in the most severe cases, delusions and hallucinations.



# PERINATAL SUPPORT FOR YOUR FAMILY & FRIENDS

Pregnancy and postpartum mood and anxiety disorders affect the whole family. Here are some tips that might help you along the way. Remember that you will get through this with help and support. There is no magic cure, and sometimes recover seems slow, but things will keep improving if you stick to a plan of healthcare, support and communication.

## Talk with your family member or friend

“I want to know how you are feeling and I’m here to talk.”

“I am concerned about you. It’s hard to take care of a baby and adjust to being a mom all at once.”

“I want to make some time to talk once a day about your feelings, wants, and needs. Everyone is so focused on the baby and I know you need support as well.”

## Provide tangible support

“What would be helpful? I would like to take on more of the daily chores during this transition.”

“Could we schedule a time for you and I to spend together once a week, just us?”

“Can I share nighttime responsibilities so you can also get what you need? We can create a schedule together.”

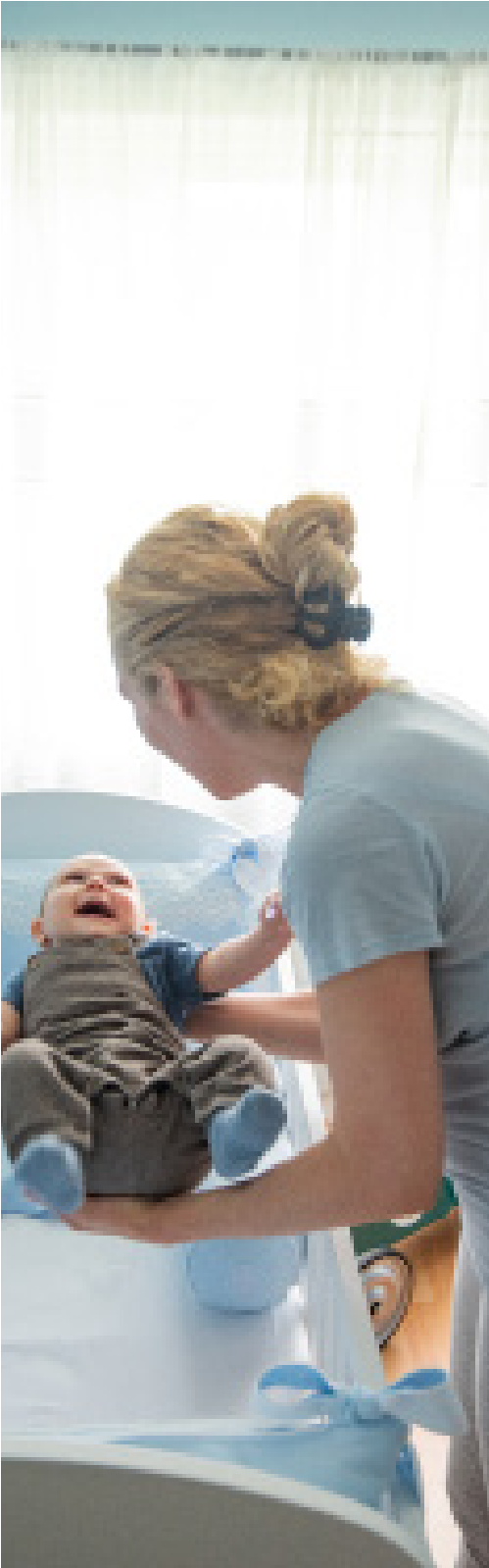
## Reach out for help

Help for partners and families at Postpartum Support International:  
[www.postpartum.net/get-help/family](http://www.postpartum.net/get-help/family)

Information for men affected by postpartum depression:  
[www.postpartummen.com/postpartum-depression](http://www.postpartummen.com/postpartum-depression)

Online support meetings at Postpartum Support International:  
[www.postpartum.net/get-help/psi-online-support-meetings](http://www.postpartum.net/get-help/psi-online-support-meetings)

# SLEEP TIPS FOR MOM & BABY



1. Talk about your sleep needs during pregnancy, prior to delivery and postpartum. Ask for support and share the nighttime parenting as often as you can, take shifts and remain consistent. It is better to get a 4 hour period of sleep, than multiple periods of broken sleep.
2. Establish a bedtime routine for yourself and your infant. Remember to shut off screens two hours before bed, lower bright lights and maintain quiet activity prior to bedtime. Infants also need to transition from wake to sleep, consider wearing, rocking, singing, nursing to assist with the transition from wake to sleep. Keep bed and wake times as consistent as possible.
3. Eat a light snack before bed, but do not drink or eat anything heavy. Try to eat dinner 2 hours prior to bed. Keep in mind certain foods and drinks may interfere with sleep, including spicy food or caffeine. Offer your infant a snack prior to bed, remember though, small babies = small tummies.
4. Try to minimize use of caffeine or at least keep use to the morning. Caffeine should be avoided 8 hours prior to your bedtime.
5. Exercise. It is best to keep the exercise routine to the morning as it may interfere with your sleep if done in afternoon or evening.
6. Keep a cool room for yourself and your infant. Use a fan, air conditioner and if you get cold, add blankets or layers for yourself. Use a sleep sack for your infant.
7. Sleep at night. Try to limit naps as you increase the amount of nighttime sleep you are getting. However, if your night sleep is limited due to infants needs schedule naps for 30-45 minutes. These should occur around 6 hours after you wake.
8. Keep your room dark. Turn off the TV, radio, screens, use a white noise machine, fan or other soothing background. Use opaque shades to block out early morning and daytime sun.
9. During the day allow for as much sunlight in the house as you can. Expose yourself and your infant to this.
10. Keep your eye on the prize! Remember your sleep deprivation is temporary and it will change. Your baby and you will return to sleeping through the night.

# MOVEMENT & MENTAL HEALTH

Although exercise during pregnancy and postpartum can be challenging for many reasons, it remains an important element of treatment. People who engage in regular movement tend to experience positive effects on both mental and physical health.

## How can exercise/movement help me?

- Reduced severity of depression and anxiety
- Improved self confidence
- Improved sleep
- Increased endorphins, that allow body to relax and calm
- Improved stress management
- Improved physical health, strength, and weight loss

## How can I find the motivation or time?

### MOTIVATION

- Set small goals and increase slowly
- Keep track of your efforts
- Do something you enjoy that is easily accessible
- Engage in active play with your child, smiles and laughter may be reinforcing!
- Find a partner to exercise with you

### TIME MANAGEMENT

- Park at the back of the parking lot and walk
- Take the stairs when you can
- Walk for brief periods of time and break this up throughout the day
- Take your infant for stroller walks or wear your baby
- Phone call? Walk and talk

