

Parent Toolkit:

Perinatal Mental Health

Perinatal is the period of time that can include up to 6 months before you become pregnant and up to a year after giving birth.

Self-Care: A Priority in the Transition to Motherhood



Why don't we give mothers more information about self-care as an important coping skill during pregnancy and after the birth of their child? We focus so much on other parts of the experience - preparing with breathing techniques, packing bags, sleep preparations, feeding techniques, safety - and we often treat the mothers' wellness and sense of peace as an afterthought.

Self-care is necessary. It's an anchor during the transition to motherhood. It's best to learn self-care skills before your child is born (although sometimes this isn't possible, and we may need to change our self-care practices after the baby arrives).

So what exactly is self-care?

Self-care isn't a weekly soak in a bathtub, a monthly trip to the spa, or a treat we give ourselves. Self-care is a daily routine where we focus on our needs, including physical and emotional needs. We learn to soothe ourselves and deal with stress as it happens, before it builds up and explodes.

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

Mindfulness is a big part of effective self-care. When we are fully present with our experience, we can shift our physical and mental state.

Motherhood is beautiful. It is also filled with demands, schedules, activities, chaos, and supporting the life of another human being. We can't wait until we've used up all our energy before we meet our needs for self-care, as this can hurt us more in the long run. Make sure to prioritize and build a routine for your self-care. So please, take care Mama.

Reproductive Mood Disorders

Pregnancy and the postpartum period are both joyful and exhausting times for many women. It's common to have feelings of tiredness, low energy, irritability, sleep problems, strong emotional reactions, worry, and hormonal and body changes during this time.*

**While these symptoms are common during the pregnancy and the postpartum period, they can also be a sign of depression or anxiety if you have them for more than a few weeks, and they get in the way of your daily functioning.*

Baby Blues

After childbirth, your hormone levels (estrogen and progesterone) will drop way down, which may cause short-term mood changes. Also, hormones produced by your thyroid gland may go down and leave you feeling tired and sluggish. You may have these symptoms from a few days to 3 weeks after birth. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 50-85% of postpartum women experience these symptoms. We call these symptoms “baby blues.”

Other “baby blues” symptoms may include mood swings, anxiety, sadness, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, crying, not being able to concentrate, changes in appetite, and difficulty sleeping.



Reproductive Mood Disorders

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.

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.
- 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.

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.

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.



For Family and Friends: How You Can Help

Supporting someone you love through pregnancy or postpartum challenges can feel overwhelming at times. You may wonder what to say, how to help, or where to turn for resources. While there's no quick fix, your care and encouragement make a real difference. Recovery can take time, but with consistent support, open communication, and professional care, things can—and do—get better. The ideas below are meant to give you practical ways to show up, as well as resources to support you in this important role.

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 practical 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

Information for men affected by postpartum depression:
www.postpartummen.com/postpartum-depression

Online support meetings at Postpartum Support International:
www.postpartum.net/get-help/psi-online-support-meetings

Sleep Tips for Parents and Baby



1. Talk about your sleep needs before, during, and after pregnancy. Ask for support and share nighttime parenting duties as often as you can. Take shifts and be consistent. It's better to get one uninterrupted 4-hour period of sleep than multiple periods of interrupted sleep.
2. Create a bedtime routine for you and your baby. Remember to shut screens off 2 hours before bed, lower bright lights, and do only quiet activities before bedtime. Babies also need time to shift from being awake to sleeping, so think about rocking, singing, or nursing activities to help them transition. Keep bedtime and wake up times as consistent as possible.
3. Eat a light snack before bed, but do not drink or eat anything heavy. Try to eat dinner at least 2 hours before going to bed. Keep in mind certain foods and drinks may interfere with sleep, including spicy food or caffeine. Offer your baby a snack before bed, but remember that small babies have small tummies.
4. Try to limit caffeine, or at least only drink caffeine in the morning. Avoid caffeine 8 hours before bedtime.
5. Exercise. It's best to exercise in the morning if possible, as it can interfere with your sleep if you exercise in the afternoon or evening.
6. Keep the room cool for yourself and your baby to sleep in. Use a fan or air conditioner. If you get cold, add blankets or layers for yourself and use a sleep sack for your baby.
7. Sleep at night. Try to limit naps. If your nighttime sleep is limited because of your baby's needs, schedule naps for 30-45 minutes around 6 hours after you wake.
8. Keep your room dark. Turn off the TV, radio, and screens. If you need soothing background noise, use a white noise machine or a fan. Use light-blocking shades to block early morning and daytime sun.
9. During the day, get as much sunlight in the house for you and your baby as you can.
10. Don't get discouraged. Remember that your sleep issues are temporary and will change. You and your baby will eventually be able to sleep through the night.

Movement & Mental Health

Although it can be challenging to exercise during pregnancy and the postpartum period, it's an important part of your health. People who get regular movement tend to have better mental and physical health.

How can exercise and movement help me?

- Less severe depression and anxiety
- Improved self-confidence
- Improved sleep
- Increased endorphins (chemicals that help your body to relax and calm)
- Improved stress management
- Improved physical health and strength

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 easy.
- Engage in active play with your child - their smiles and laughter can reinforce your practice!
- 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 baby for stroller walks, or wear your baby while walking.
- If you need to make a phone call, walk while you talk.

Self-Compassion in Parenthood: Home Practice

Take a moment to write yourself a letter. Include words of understanding, empathy, or comfort about your experience as a parent experiencing stress and deserving support. Consider a gentle tone, reassurance, and encouragement. Read this as a daily mindfulness practice or put this away somewhere special and open it when you need it. Use self validation skills as you write.

We are better able to take care of others when we take care of ourselves in small ways, every day.

Dear Self:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.