

Postnatal Depression: Advice for Partners

Reviewed: June 2010

Postnatal Depression: Advice for Partners

This leaflet aims to provide **information** and advice to **partners** who are living with a woman that is suffering from postnatal depression.

If you need further advice or support then you should speak to your GP about your concerns.

Becoming a parent can be a time of great excitement and joy. However, it is also a time of significant change and adjustment for the whole family. It is normal for new mothers (and fathers) to feel overwhelmed because many life changes are happening in such a short space of time.

Some of the things that you and your partner have to adjust to include:

- your new role as a parent (or if this is not your first child, then adjusting to coping with more children)
- changes in your relationship
- having less free time for hobbies, relaxation, socialising
- changes in your other relationships (i.e. with family members and friends)
- changes to your working life
- possible financial pressures
- a greater sense of responsibility

It is perfectly normal for your partner to feel a bit low in mood or stressed as they find ways of adjusting to their new situation. Many new parents feel exhausted from lack of sleep at this stage, and this can make it even harder to cope with the changes in their lifestyle. It takes time for women, couples and families to adjust to a new baby. Given time, things should start to get easier as you and your partner begin to feel more confident in your new role as parents.

That being said, if your partner is continuing to struggle with low mood for several weeks or months after having the baby, or if these feelings seem to be getting worse, then she may be suffering from postnatal depression.

What is the difference between the “baby blues” and Postnatal Depression?

It is thought that as many as 80% of new mothers will experience feelings of weepiness in the few days after the birth. This heightened emotional state is caused by hormonal changes and also because once the initial ‘high’ of giving birth dies down, natural fears may start to creep in. This is called ‘the baby blues’ and usually disappears after a few days.

However, if the feelings of low mood and tearfulness persist for several weeks or months then your partner may have postnatal depression. Sometimes the depression starts during pregnancy (this is called Antenatal Depression), or anytime after the birth within the first year. It is thought that 10-20% of women suffer from postnatal depression. It is also common for women who are suffering from post natal depression to experience anxiety symptoms as well.

Even though postnatal depression is now quite well known, women can still feel ashamed or embarrassed about admitting to having difficult feelings after they have had a baby. People often expect women to see motherhood as a time of joy and excitement. Or people might say things like “Don’t worry, you’re just tired.” This type of response from others can make it even more difficult to admit that there is a problem.

Signs of Postnatal Depression

These are some of the signs or symptoms you may notice in your partner if she has postnatal depression:

Changes in her emotions or feelings

- Expressing feeling sad, upset, numb, disconnected, despairing
- Expressing feeling that she can’t cope as well as normal
- Expressing feelings of guilt and inadequacy (e.g. about having negative feelings when they have just had a baby)
- Crying a lot *or* feeling unable to cry
- Loss of interest and enjoyment in things she previously enjoyed
- Expressing feeling alone even in company

- Anger outbursts, or an increase in frustration or irritability

Changes in the way she thinks

- Losing confidence in herself
- Expecting the worst and having negative or gloomy thoughts
- Thinking that everything seems hopeless
- Expressing thoughts of suicide
- Expressing thoughts of self loathing
- Worrying about not feeling love towards her baby

Changes in her behaviour

- Poor memory or concentration
- Restlessness
- Poor sleep (which is not due to your baby waking in the night)
- Feeling worse at a particular time of day (usually morning)
- Changes in appetite
- Tearfulness
- Finding it difficult to do even the simplest of things
- Having difficulty bonding with the baby
- Not doing her normal activities because of how she feels
- Cutting herself off from other people
- Being inactive; just sitting doing nothing for long periods of time
- Finding it difficult to see the funny side of things

It is important to note that not everyone who is depressed has all of these symptoms. However if you think your partner is experiencing several of the symptoms listed above, and these are not getting better over time then she may be suffering from depression. It is important that you take steps to help your partner and/or seek help from others.

What causes Postnatal Depression?

We do not know exactly what causes postnatal depression. Most people believe that the changes in levels of hormones (which we know affect our mood) during pregnancy and after the birth must have something to do with it but this is usually not the only reason. Usually there is more than one reason and this differs from person to person. Sometimes depression can start without any obvious cause. Psychological and social factors are important. For

example, social isolation, not having a good support network can be a risk factor. If your partner has had depression in the past then this can also make her more likely to have postnatal depression.

Depression is likely to be caused by a combination of things, including:

- Family history of depression
- Hormonal changes during pregnancy and after the birth
- Psychological factors (e.g. low self esteem, difficult childhood experiences)
- Social factors (e.g. relationship difficulties, lack of support from family /friends, social isolation)
- Stressful life events (e.g. illness, bereavement, job loss)
- Circumstances (e.g. money worries, physical illness, unemployment).

Are some people more likely to become depressed than others?

Some people seem to be more vulnerable than others to develop depression. This may be because of body make up (including body chemistry) or because of early life experiences and family influences. Some people may be generally more inclined to “look on the gloomy side” of life, and this may make them more likely to develop depression.

What can you do to help your partner if she has post natal depression?

1) Offer her emotional support

During the pregnancy, maintaining a positive outlook is very important in helping the mother hold a positive attitude towards the birth and her baby. Encourage your partner to talk about how she is feeling. Although it may be tempting to tell her what you think she should do, this may not be the most helpful way of encouraging her to open up to you. Although not your intention, it may seem like you are telling her the ‘right’ way to do things which she may experience as criticism. Do not underestimate how helpful it will be if you just listen and allow her space to talk through her

worries and feelings. It can also be helpful to provide her with comfort and re-assurance.

2) Offer practical support

Your actions can be as important as what you say. One way to support your partner is to make sure the baby's needs are met so that she can have a bit of time to herself. Ensuring you bond, interact and care for your baby can help take the strain off your partner and has numerous benefits for your own relationship with your child. Furthermore, by taking care of household tasks and chores you can help your partner cope with the enormous task of adapting to motherhood without daily tasks becoming overwhelming.

3) Support your partner to take action and not avoid tasks that she finds overwhelming

Whilst helping with household tasks and chores is important, it can also be helpful to help your partner achieve things herself rather than doing everything for her. Try encouraging her to do activities she may find difficult or scary by doing them together - such as, bathing the baby or going for a walk outside. Help your partner break down larger tasks into manageable chunks to make the daily routine seem less overwhelming. It might also help to set goals which are realistically achievable and work on them together.

4) Ensure that you and your partner take care of yourselves physically

Make sure you leave time and energy to take care of yourself. If you become run down, tired and irritable then you will be much less able to help your partner. Try and make sure you eat healthily and get regular fresh air and exercise when possible. As well as enabling you to better support your partner this will also help you maintain a more positive outlook.

It may be helpful to try and make changes to your lifestyle as a couple.

Health tips-

- Try to find ways of getting rest and fitting in relaxation time

- Keep up your social life by staying in touch with friends
- Try to reduce the amount of alcohol you drink
- If you smoke, try to keep this to a minimum or if you would like help to stop, speak to your GP (the NHS offers a free Stop Smoking Service)
- Aim to eat healthily and try to maintain a healthy weight (go to <http://www.moodcafe.co.uk> and enter *getting the balance right* into the search box for information and a booklet on balanced eating)
- Take regular exercise (light exercise for your partner)

Light exercise such as swimming, walking or yoga will help your partner get some relaxing activity back into her routine. To support your partner in this you could offer to look after your baby leaving her free to exercise. If your partner is nervous about being separated from you and the baby then suggest that you both go so that your partner is close to the baby but still able to take part in exercise whilst you and baby watch from the sides.

5) Gently encourage your partner to challenge her negative thinking

When someone is experiencing depression they often tend to think and expect the worst of themselves, their life and the future. Encourage your partner to not just accept these thoughts but try to support her to:

- Identify when her mood is very low
- Jot down the unpleasant thoughts she is having during that time
- Try and counter these thoughts by writing down arguments against them. Encourage your partner to imagine what she would say to a friend if they had such negative thoughts about themselves
- Say positive things to your partner to help her feel better about herself and her parenting
- Suggest she keeps a diary of things she has enjoyed or achieved during the week. This can help her to concentrate on the good rather than bad things in life

We are not just saying 'look on the bright side' or 'think positively.' What we know is that when people are depressed they have a

different, darker, more negative view of themselves, events and the world. By helping your partner to recognise this and gain a more realistic, balanced view of things, she may find her mood begins to improve.

What treatment is available for depression?

Self Help

Self Help (such as reading this leaflet or recommended books and web sites) is an option that some women prefer to try as a first step to overcoming their post natal depression. You will find a list of recommended books and websites at the end of this leaflet. A number of these books are also part of the book prescription scheme in Fife. This means that your GP or Midwife can 'prescribe' your partner a self help book which she can then get out of the library. Further details are available at www.moodcafe.co.uk or your partner can ask her GP or Midwife. However, if you think that self help is not enough and your partners symptoms of depression are not lifting then encourage her to discuss this with her GP, Health Visitor or Midwife.

Medication

Anti-depressant medication may be an option to consider. These medications can help to take the edge off some of the symptoms of depression by increasing a chemical called "serotonin" in the brain. People often worry in case anti depressants are addictive so they are reluctant to try them. Anti-depressants are **not addictive** – your partner will be able to come off them whenever she and her GP decide the time is right. If your partner is breast feeding then she will need to discuss the options with her GP.

Talking Treatment

Talking therapies have been proven to be a recommended treatment for postnatal depression. Your partner's Health Visitor, GP or Midwife will be able to refer her to a local therapist for an assessment. Usually postnatal women are prioritised for treatment but there can still be a few weeks wait.

The talking treatments are usually counselling or therapy. Counselling or therapy would involve your partner talking to a trained health professional about her feelings and experiences. They will help her understand her difficulties and begin to work out ways of overcoming the depression. 'Cognitive Behavioural

Therapy' (CBT) is one kind of therapy that is often used in the treatment of depression. Whatever type of therapy is used, it will usually take a little time before you begin to feel the benefits, but treatment of this kind has helped many people and can be very effective.

There are a number of treatments available for post natal depression and anxiety. Often the first step is being able to recognise the need for help and feeling able to ask for it. Many women are scared to tell their GP, Midwife or Health Visitor about how they are feeling. Women often feel ashamed or embarrassed at having negative feelings after they have had a baby or worry that they will be seen as an unfit mother. In fact, professionals would prefer to be informed about any negative feelings, rather than waiting until the depression or anxiety becomes more severe. Your partner will not be condemned as an unfit mother, nor will your child be taken away. Your partner's GP, Midwife or Health Visitor will be able to offer support and advice.

Final point...

After reading through this leaflet you yourself may be experiencing low mood following the birth of your child. If this is the case then there is a separate leaflet, 'Postnatal Depression for Dads' at www.moodcafe.co.uk, that you might find helpful.

It can be difficult supporting someone through depression but by simply being there for your partner, you will be playing a significant role in helping her feel better.

Further help

Useful Websites:

Postnatal Depression - PND Productions

<http://www.postnataldepression.com/>

Contains a section on 'Tips for Partners'

Postnatal Illness Org UK:

<http://www.pni.org.uk/>

This is written by women who have suffered or are suffering from postnatal illness, and gives useful accounts based on people's own experiences. However, a word of caution – as this has not been written by medical professionals, some of the factual information may not always be entirely accurate so check anything you are not sure about with your GP or midwife.

The following websites are interactive websites which use cognitive behavioural techniques to help your partner work through their problems online:

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk

This site is designed to help your partner think about emotional problems and work towards solving them

www.moodgym.anu.edu.au

An excellent (Australian) site that will help your partner identify problem emotions and develop better coping skills. The site is very informative and is fun to use and good for all ages

www.livinglifetothefull.com

This site aims to teach life skills using cognitive behavioural techniques and includes: Understanding why we feel as we do / Practical problem solving skills / Using Anxiety Control Training relaxation / Overcoming Reduced activity / Helpful and Unhelpful behaviours / Using Medication effectively / Noticing unhelpful thoughts / Changing unhelpful thoughts / Healthy living - sleep, food, diet and exercise / Staying well

Other websites you might find helpful:

Living in Fife:

www.livinginfife.scot.nhs.uk

The Living in Fife Website has been designed specifically for people living in Fife. It provides both local and national information about support services.

Scottish Marriage Care:

<http://www.scottishmarriagecare.org/>

Scottish Marriage Care provide relationship counselling to couples and individuals all over Scotland.

Relationships Scotland:

<http://www.relationships-scotland.org.uk/index.shtml>

Relationships Scotland offer confidential relationship counselling and sexual therapy for couples and individuals.

NHS 24:

http://www.nhs24.com/content/default.asp?page=s5_4&articleID=429

This provides good clear information about the symptoms, causes, diagnosis, and treatment of postnatal depression.

'Mind' website:

http://www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/post-natal_depression

Good clear information about postnatal depression, including a small section about fathers who become depressed.

Depression Alliance website:

www.depressionalliance.org

Although this is not written specifically for antenatal or postnatal difficulties it contains good information about symptoms and treatments of depression as well as Depression Alliance campaigns and local groups.

Fife Clinical Psychology Department Website

<http://www.dwfchp.scot.nhs.uk/psychology>

Self Help Books:

The following books are available in all Fife libraries or can be purchased from most good book stores. A number of the books below are also part of the Fife book prescription scheme. This means that your GP or Midwife can 'prescribe' your partner a self help book which she can then get out of the library. Further details are available at www.moodcafe.co.uk or you can ask your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor.

Curham, S. (2000) Antenatal and postnatal depression. Practical advice and support for all sufferers. Vermilion.

ISBN: 9780091856075

(Chapter 4 contains helpful advice for fathers)

Available as a book prescription

Williams, C., Cantwell, R. & Robertson, K. (2009). Overcoming postnatal depression. A five areas approach. Hodder Arnold.
ISBN: 978-0-340-97234-2
Available as a book prescription

Aitken, C. (2000). Surviving post-natal depression: At home, no one hears you scream. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
ISBN: 978 1 85302 861 8
Available as a book prescription

Nicolson, P. (2001) Postnatal depression: Facing the paradox of loss, happiness and motherhood. Wiley.
ISBN: 0-471-48527-6

Below are some more books for depression in general (not specific to postnatal depression) – but still likely to be useful:

Burns, D. (2000) Feeling good: The new mood therapy. Avon Books.
ISBN: 0380731762
Available as a book prescription

Butler, G. and Hope, T. (1995) Managing your mind: The mental fitness guide. Oxford.
ISBN: 0192623834
(An excellent self-help textbook with chapters on all major problem areas and a good CBT & problem solving approach. Chapter 20 is particularly relevant)
Available as a book prescription

Gilbert, P. (2000) Overcoming depression. Constable and Robinson.
ISBN: 1841191256 (Every chapter lists key points at the end. Step-by-step process makes it easy to follow.)

Golant, M. and Golant, S. (1998) What to do when someone you love is depressed. Henry Holt Publishers.
ISBN: 080505829X

Greenberg, D. and Padesky, C. (1995) Mind over mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think. Guilford Press.
ISBN: 0898621283
Available as a book prescription

Rowe, D. (1996) Depression: The way out of your prison.
Routledge.
ISBN: 0415144825 (Hard reading in places)

Below are some books relating to anxiety:

Baker, R. (2003) Understanding Panic Attacks & Overcoming Fear. Lion Publishing.
ISBN: 0745951236

Bourne, E. J. (2001) The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook, 3rd Edition. New Harbinger Publications.
ISBN: 1567310745

Goldman, C. and Babior, S. (1995) Overcoming Panic, Anxiety and Phobias: New Strategies to Free Yourself from Worry and Fear. Whole Person Associates,
ISBN: 1570250723
Available as a book prescription

Jeffers, S. (1987) Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (reprinted 2004)
ISBN: 0151305595
(Easy to read. Encourages coping strategies and an overall change in attitude.)
Also available in audio format

Silove, D. (2001) Overcoming Panic. Robinson.
ISBN: 1854877011
Available as a book prescription

Trickett, S. (1992) Coping Successfully with Panic Attacks. Sheldon Press.
ISBN: 0859696464

Telephone Helplines:

The following organisations and help lines may also be useful:

Breathing Space – mental health helpline
(Mon - Thurs: 6pm-2am, Fri – Mon: 6pm-6am) Tel: 0800 83 85 87

CRUSE Bereavement Care Scotland - help line for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people
(Mon - Fri: 9.30am-5pm) Tel: 0845 600 2227

Depression Alliance Scotland – helpline for depression
(Mon - Fri: 11am-1pm, 2pm-4pm) Tel: 0845 123 2320

Bipolar Fellowship Scotland – help for those experiencing severe depression
(Mon - Fri: 9.30am-3.30pm) Tel: 0141 400 1867

National Debt Helpline – help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt
(Mon - Fri: 9am-9pm, Sat: 9.30am-1pm) Tel: 0808 808 4000

Samaritans – confidential support for anyone in a crisis
24 hours Tel: 08457 90 90 90
Textphone: 08457 90 91 92