The Best For Me and My Baby
Managing Mental Health During Pregnancy and Early Parenthood
Health professionals and parents working together
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Booklets can be ordered online at www.copmi.net.au or by phoning the COPMI national initiative on (+61 8) 8367 0888.

Also available in the series: Piecing the Puzzle Together and Family Talk.
This booklet is for women with a mental health problem or mental illness (and their partners) who are thinking about having a baby, are new parents or are about to have a baby.

The booklet contains helpful ideas you can use from the time you are thinking of having a baby up to when your child is two – three years old.

You don’t have to do this alone – you can get help from your:

**Health professionals**
Including your GP, obstetrician, paediatrician, community nurse, child health nurse, midwife, psychologist, psychiatrist, mental health key/case worker, drug and alcohol worker, Emergency Department doctor, counsellor and social worker.

**Support network**
Including family or friends, your partner, neighbours, community workers, nursing mothers or parenting groups, church workers and support groups. If family or friends are not supportive, you may need to look at your broader network.

Many mothers experience some mental health problems around birthing times but not all of them will be long-term. For more information specifically about postnatal depression visit the beyondblue website at [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or contact your doctor, midwife, child health nurse or local community health service.
There are things you can do even at this early stage to make pregnancy and parenting easier.

‘My doctor gave me the confidence to go ahead.’

- Make sure you find a doctor you feel comfortable with to discuss both your mental and physical health needs.
- Tell your doctor that you are planning to have a baby and discuss how to manage your illness during pregnancy.
- Discuss with your doctor any medications you may be taking and any effect they may have on pregnancy, baby’s development or breastfeeding.

‘It was great to have the early support of family and friends so I knew I wasn’t alone.’

- Talk with your partner or support person about the impact a new baby will have on your lives and the changes you will need to make.
- Decide which family members and friends you can count on for help. Share your hopes and your fears with them.
- Find out about local support services such as preparation for parenthood classes, child health centres and child care.
- Contact other women who have had similar experiences – find out what worked for them (see inside back cover for some contacts).
‘I was determined to be well for my baby.’

• Find time to relax and take care of yourself.
• Keep as healthy as possible. Eat healthy foods and do some exercise. Ask your doctor about the benefits of taking folic acid.
• Recreational drugs and alcohol can harm your baby – now is the best time to stop taking them.
• Maintain stability in your life. If possible avoid stressful changes such as moving house.

If you want to breastfeed, find out if any medication you take can harm your baby and discuss possible changes to your treatment plan with your doctor. If you decide that breastfeeding is not best for you or your baby, get advice from your child health nurse or midwife about how to make bottle-feeding a pleasant experience for you and your baby.

Medication

If you are planning to have a baby or are pregnant and you take medication, it is important to review your medications with your doctor or other health professional. Properly managed medication can relieve symptoms of your illness, lower stress and help you function, but you need to check whether your medication:

• may affect your pregnancy or baby
• interacts with other drugs – even common over-the-counter medications.

‘My GP helped me manage my medication so I could breastfeed.’

Lots of people find pregnancy is a time when they re-evaluate their lives and their relationships. Your health professionals or your support network can help you make the best decisions for you and your baby.
Pregnancy is a time of great expectations and hope for the future, but it can also be a bit scary if you don’t know enough about the changes ahead.

‘It really helped to plan ahead with my partner and family.’

• Think about your expectations of birth and parenthood. Do your ideas come from your own childhood, from TV or magazines? Decide if these are realistic or right for you.

• Involve your support network, especially if you will be a single mother. Develop a care plan so you know your baby will be properly looked after if you are unwell (see page 12).

• Budget for extra things you will need. If money is a problem, talk to a social worker or financial counsellor (or ask your doctor or health worker to refer you to one).

• Organise baby’s needs well in advance. Find out how to make your home baby-safe.

‘Looking after my baby also meant looking after myself.’

• Expect some hormonal and emotional changes throughout your pregnancy. Identify family or friends who you can ring or ask for help if you become upset, exhausted or angry.

• Include some rest times in your day and reduce your daily workload.

• Eat healthy foods and exercise.
Alcohol and other drugs

‘The best thing I did for my baby was give up alcohol and cigarettes.’

Alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs (including misuse of prescription drugs) can affect your own physical and mental health and the health of your unborn baby and infant.

If you use heroin, amphetamines, marijuana or misuse prescription drugs, they may affect your baby’s health. For example, your baby may be born with a dependency on a drug. The baby may need to be cared for in the hospital nursery and may need medication to make him or her comfortable. Talk to your doctor and midwife about what to expect.

‘I was heartbroken to see my baby in withdrawal but at least I knew what to expect.’

If you have a partner or other support person help them to get their questions answered too.

Checklist

- Plan ahead to avoid stress.
- Involve your support networks.
- Develop a baby care plan for times when you may be unwell.
- Discuss medication, treatment issues and baby’s needs with your health professionals.

‘My GP and local health centre had all the information I needed.’

Arrange several visits to your treating psychiatrist or GP during your pregnancy and discuss:

- continuing or changing medication
- breastfeeding
- warning signs of your illness
- a schedule of postnatal visits.

Keep up your antenatal visits and visit the hospital where you will give birth to familiarise yourself with the surroundings. Discuss your condition and treatment needs honestly with the staff.

Talk to your GP, midwife or community health nurse about what you need for your baby and the physical and emotional needs of your baby. Ask for information sheets and read as much as you can.

If you have a partner or other support person help them to get their questions answered too.
Now the baby is here

Checklist

• Talk to your doctor about if and how your illness or medication may affect your parenting.
• Find out what additional help is available – home help, social workers, support groups.
• Tell your support people how they can help (see page 10).
• Make time to play with and enjoy your child.

Mothers may worry unnecessarily because they do not know how most parents feel after childbirth.

Many new mothers:
• feel overwhelmed by the intense and unexpected emotions of birth and early parenthood
• experience conflicting and swinging emotions of joy, fear, confusion, sadness, frustration, isolation and love
• feel inadequate, are unable to concentrate, forget things and feel they are being criticised
• resent the change in identity and the loss of their free and spontaneous lifestyle.

Many suffer from physical exhaustion and lack of energy. They are on call 24 hours a day.

Mothers may also feel physical discomfort of sore breasts and healing from the birth, and anxiety about establishing breastfeeding.

Being a parent is rewarding but it can also be a challenge – especially if you have mental health problems.

‘In the first few weeks I felt everything – numb, exhaustion, fear of handling this tiny new person, incredible happiness, and tears. I had no idea this was normal.’
‘The best advice I can give any new mother is: Don’t be afraid to ask for help.’

Seek help immediately if you have thoughts of harming yourself or your baby. Go and speak to an Emergency Department doctor if necessary, or ring a crisis line or a trusted friend or family member. Prepare a list of the names and phone numbers of the people you can ring if you need to.

My important phone numbers

Lifeline .................. 13 11 14

Asking for help is sensible and shows you want to be a successful mother. It is much more difficult to face problems or try new things when you are unwell. Support from your health professionals, friends and family will reduce the impact of your illness on your parenting.

• Make an appointment to see your child health nurse soon after you get out of hospital – get help and guidance early, even on ‘little things’.

• Use your postnatal visit (about six weeks after birth) to discuss things with your doctor. Prepare a list of questions to ask.

• Maintain visits with the doctor treating your mental illness and review your medication together.

• Discuss issues with your child health nurse. They will listen and know whether they can help or refer you to another professional. They may also be able to introduce you to other new parents who are going through the same things as you.

• Major problems with feeding or settling babies can be improved at specialised live-in mother and baby facilities in some states.

• Your doctor or community health nurse can help with information, advice and support. If you are under extreme stress for more than one - two weeks, make an appointment to work out your own stress management plan.
Babies need to know they are loved. They need to feel safe and to trust that their basic needs will be met. If you are struggling, try ‘practising’ to smile as you interact with your baby. Enjoy contact through play. If you feel you cannot respond positively, ask someone else to come in and play with the baby for a while, and ask your health professional to help you learn play strategies.

‘The little bugger used to whinge just to upset me.’

It is easy to believe a baby who is difficult to settle is ‘out to get at me’. A child’s needs are different from an adult’s. Babies’ cries are telling you something – is it hunger or a wet nappy, or maybe just the need for company? They are not doing it to annoy you. They are just trying to communicate and develop.

Talking with other parents or with health professionals can help you understand your children better and what is normal behaviour at different ages.

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‘I thought mothers instinctively bonded with their babies.’

All new mothers and fathers have to learn parenting skills. We learn to recognise what our own baby is trying to say to us when they smile, cling or cry. Those who respond to their infant develop more confidence in their parenting. The baby’s self-esteem and development grows through warm and trusting relationships with adults.

Sometimes parents find it hard to recognise baby’s signals – these may be harder to pick up if you are mentally unwell. If the baby gets mixed messages (loving and caring and then rejecting), the baby may respond by being clingy, withdrawn or fearful.

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Play – great for both of you!
- Babies need play to learn and to develop.
- Let your baby teach you how to play and have fun.
- Babies like to be held and rocked, to be read and sung to.
- Older infants like peek-a-boo games and noisy and colourful objects, or imitating what you do.
- Playing with baby is not wasting time.
‘Looking back I wish I had made more time to look after myself as well as my baby.’

Your baby needs you to be as well as possible.

• Tell the people supporting you what you need help with, without feeling guilty (see the next page for ideas).
• Take time out from your baby occasionally. Arrange some babysitting or regular child care.
• Allow time for leisure activities and make relaxation part of your daily routine – do yoga, get a friend to give you a massage, or simply sit outside in the fresh air.
• Get sleep when you can. A ‘sleep routine’ or some physical activity may help. If something is troubling you, write it down and talk it over with someone when you can.

• Make sure you eat healthy foods and at regular times. Keep up your medication.
• Decide what really matters. Focus on your needs and the needs of your child. Use a diary to keep track of the things you have to do (doctors appointments etc.), then decide what you can (or want to) do rather than what you feel you should do.
• Single mums – ask a family member or friend to stay with you for a while, or ask to stay with them, so you can have a bit of support.

Ring the Child Care Access Hotline for advice about local child care options on Freecall 1800 670 305.
Plan ahead - many child care centres have waiting lists.
‘It’s great when friends ring just to let you know they’re there.’

All new mothers and fathers can feel scared and alone. Parents with a mental illness may need extra support from family and friends. Talk with them about their illness and ask if it’s ok to find out more. Discuss possible symptoms and warning signs and how you can support them. Fear and stigma of mental illness can make families uncomfortable about sharing their worries with each other.

Ways you can help

Practical support
- Ask how you can help and offer to do small tasks, help with cleaning, cook some meals or do the shopping. Follow through with what you’ve offered to do.
- Help with, or offer to organise, child care so mum can have some regular time out for herself.
- Try to ensure mum gets enough rest and food (offer to do the night shift with the baby).
- Offer to take mum to appointments or support groups, especially if transport is a problem.

Emotional support
- Reassure her that she is a great mum doing a very demanding job.
- Be understanding and let her know that she doesn't have to manage on her own. Offer to communicate with others for her if she finds it difficult.
- Show her she matters as a person and not just as a mother. Let her express her true feelings. Be patient and non-judgemental.
- Organise an outing, keep it short with minimal stress.

Whatever you do, DON’T:
- Tell her to snap out of it (because she can’t).
- Tell her to ignore her feelings and get a hobby.
- Criticise or say negative things.
- Leave her unsupported with the baby for a long time.
- ‘Take over’ – this may lower her confidence in her own parenting.
If you are the partner of a mother with a mental illness

‘Things really improved when my partner stopped ignoring my illness and asked how he could help.’

• Ask your partner’s health professional how to get involved or what help your partner needs (check with your partner first if this is ok).
• Go along to your child health centre with your partner so you both get information on feeding, settling, growth and development, etc.
• Enjoy being a parent. Have special activities that you and your baby do without mum (going for a walk together lets you spend time with the baby and gives your partner time out).
• You may feel ignored and left out by your partner’s preoccupation with the baby, or feel helpless if your partner is unwell. Find out if there is someone that has been through this that you can talk to (see inside the back cover for some contact phone numbers).
• Don’t avoid the situation by spending less time at home. Plan some relaxing time together as a couple.

‘Look after yourself – caring can be exhausting.’

• Look after yourself so you can support your child and your partner. Accept help from others, including practical help such as child care or financial support. Ring the Carer Advisory and Counselling Service on Freecall 1800 242 636 for information and advice.

If both parents experience mental illness, having a baby can be stressful and there will be even more need to:
• seek help from your health professionals and support people as early as possible
• set up emergency care plans for the baby (see page 12).
Plan ahead to manage separation during the times you are not well

Planning for your baby’s needs if you become unwell and/or require hospitalisation is vitally important and ensures you have a say in what happens to your baby. Infants do not always cope well with separation from the parent. Spend some time with your partner, a good friend, your GP or other health worker who knows you well to develop a plan of action that you’re happy with.

Children cope better with alternative care from adults they like and trust. Ask a family member or close friend to help with the everyday routine of your baby so they can act as an emergency caregiver if necessary. The less the baby’s life is disrupted the easier it will be when you and your baby return home.

If you are hospitalised or separated from your baby:

• it is normal to feel guilty and grieve for your child – talk to your doctor, nurse or other health professional about your feelings
• keep the other parent or caregiver informed of your progress
• if it is not upsetting, arrange for your baby to ‘room in’ or visit you or arrange to be kept informed about the baby’s wellbeing.

Older infants can understand simple explanations of why mummy is away or that mummy is unwell and will get better. Storybooks that talk about illness and separation or showing the baby mum’s photo, can help.

A baby care plan for you to complete can be downloaded from www.copmi.net.au/careplans
It includes:
• feeding likes and dislikes
• things that help baby settle or sleep
• contact details of adults you have arranged for your baby to stay with
• names of the baby’s doctors and other important details.
For more information and help

Ask your GP, health worker, community health centre, pre-school, school or child care centre director/worker about local services and information, or call the phone numbers below for help.

beyondblue. ................................................................. 1300 22 4636
(For support and advice)

Carer Advisory and Counselling Service. .................................................. 1800 242 636
(For information, advice and support)

Child Care Access Hotline ................................................................. 1800 670 305
(For information and advice about local child care options)

Family Drug Support Line ................................................................. 1300 368 186
(For 24-hour assistance with alcohol and drug related issues)

Lifeline. ......................................................................................... 13 11 14
(For 24-hour telephone counselling and referral to other support services)

MensLine Australia ........................................................................ 1300 78 99 78
(For 24-hour information and support services)

Mental Illness Fellowship Helpline .................................................. 1800 985 944
(For information and referral to local support services)

National Perinatal Depression Helpline ........................................ 1300 726 306
(For information, support and referral to support services)

Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline ............................................... 1800 882 436
(For 24-hour information, support and referral)

Quitline ................................................................. 13 78 48
(For information and advice about stopping smoking)

SANE Helpline ............................................................................. 1800 187 263
(For information, advice and referral to support services)

Parent Helplines (For information, counselling and support)

ACT ....................................... (02) 6287 3833
NSW
– Karitane Careline ................. 1300 227 464
– Parentline ............................. 1300 1300 52
– Tresillian Parents Helpline ... 1800 637 357
NT ............................................. 1300 30 1300

QLD ............................................. 1300 30 1300
SA ............................................ 1300 364 100
TAS ........................................... 1300 808 178
VIC ............................................ 13 22 89
WA ............................................. (08) 6279 1200
or 1800 654 432

Useful Websites (Remember, the internet is available at local libraries)

Australian Breastfeeding Association
www.breastfeeding.asn.au
beyondblue
www.beyondblue.org.au
Black Dog Institute
www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
Carers Australia
www.carersaustralia.com.au
Child and Youth Health
www.cyh.com
Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI)
www.copmi.net.au
Family Drug Support
www.fds.org.au

Mental Health and Wellbeing
www.mentalhealth.gov.au
Mental Health in Multicultural Australia
www.mhima.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifa.org.au
My Child
www.mychild.gov.au
Post and Antenatal Depression Association (PANDA)
www.panda.org.au
Raising Children Network
www.raisingchildren.net.au
SANE Australia
www.sane.org
'I was determined to be well for my baby.'

'The best advice I can give any new mother is: Don’t be afraid to ask for help.'

'My GP helped me manage my medication so I could breastfeed.'

'Things really improved when my partner stopped ignoring my illness and asked how he could help.'

We all want to be the best parents we can. The ideas in this book will help you and your baby stay healthy and grow together.