

Postnatal depression - the family

Around one in 10 mothers develops postnatal depression (PND), a form of depression that may appear within 12 months of having a baby. Symptoms of depression can also appear during pregnancy and before birth, in which case the condition is called antenatal depression. Fathers can also develop depression before and after the birth of a child.

The symptoms of ante and postnatal depression depend on the severity of the depression, but may include low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy and guilt, tearfulness, sleeping difficulties and panic attacks.

A woman with PND may withdraw from everyone, including her baby and partner. The support of family members is crucial. In particular, her partner can play a pivotal role in her recovery.

Relationship stress

Having a baby places great strain on a couple's relationship and that strain is amplified if the woman experiences PND. Some experts believe PND is a major unrecognised contributor to the breakdown of relationships.

Couples are advised to delay any decision about separation or divorce until the PND has been successfully treated. In many cases, the relationship stabilises once the PND is improved.

Other suggestions for a couple dealing with PND include:

- Find out as much information as you can about PND.
- Try to recognise that PND may be causing relationship problems, not the other way around.
- Keep the lines of communication open.
- Try not to take each other's moods or criticisms too personally.
- Seek out appropriate stress management techniques, such as exercise or meditation.
- To prevent arguments and resentments, talk about sharing the household duties and who is supposed to do what.
- Try to arrange at least an occasional night out together away from the baby.
- Seek professional help.

How the partner can help

Suggestions include:

- Be patient.
- Encourage your partner to talk about her feelings.
- Accept that her feelings are genuine and don't trivialise them by telling her to 'snap out of it' or 'get over it'.
- Try to understand her point of view.
- Don't take her negative feelings or criticisms personally.
- Tactfully limit visitors if she doesn't feel like socialising.
- Enlist the aid of other family members to help around the house, if and when they can, including with baby-sitting.
- Tell her often that you love her.
- Show her you love her with cuddles, baby care and housework.
- Don't try to turn every cuddle into sexual intercourse.
- Don't criticise her post-pregnancy body or demand she lose weight, as she may already feel low about her appearance.
- Telephone her from work, or drop in for lunch occasionally if you work close to home.

- Care for the baby after work to promote your father–child relationship, while giving your partner a much-needed break.
- If you are worried, encourage her to see a doctor.
- Go to the doctor yourself for information and advice, if your partner initially refuses to go.
- Reassure her that, with appropriate help and support, she will recover from PND.

Fathers can also develop PND

A recent British study found that around three per cent of new fathers are prone to PND, particularly if their partner or wife is depressed. In families where one of the parents already has a child or children from a previous relationship, the rate of PND in fathers rises to around seven per cent.

Other risk factors for PND in fathers include:

- Older age
- First-time parent
- Small circle of friends
- Limited social interaction and support
- Limited education
- Concurrent stressful life events
- Quality of the relationship with wife or partner.

Self-help for the father

As a new father, you need to look after your own physical and emotional wellbeing. Suggestions include:

- Make sure you have some time to yourself, apart from work and family.
- Try to keep up important hobbies and interests as much as possible.
- Talk to close friends about your feelings and concerns.

Suggestions for family and friends

Ways you can help a loved one who has PND include:

- Find out as much information as you can about PND.
- Be patient and understanding.
- Ask the couple how you can help.
- Offer to baby-sit.
- Offer to help around the house.
- Let the mother know you are there for her, even if she doesn't feel like talking.
- Appreciate that the father may also be emotionally affected by the demands and challenges of new parenthood.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- PANDA (Post and Ante Natal Depression Association), National Perinatal Depression Helpline Tel. 1300 726 306, Monday - Friday, 9am to 7pm AEST.
- Maternal and Child Health Line Tel. 132 229
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14.

Things to remember

- Around one in ten mothers develop postnatal depression (PND).
- Partners can play a pivotal role in recovery.
- Around three per cent of new fathers are prone to PND, particularly if their partner or wife is depressed.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

PANDA - Post and Antenatal Depression Association Inc

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