Summary

- Self-care strategies are activities and thoughts that help you stay in good physical and mental health. Practise self-care anytime, including when your child is sleeping or when they are being cared for by a trusted friend or family member.
- The birth of a baby is a special time – it can enhance and strengthen the bond between parents and carers. However, having young children can often bring up different emotions and relationship challenges for parents and caregivers.
- One in six mothers and one in 10 fathers experience postnatal depression, and one in five women experience postnatal anxiety in the first year after the birth of their baby.
- There are lots of supports out there to help dads take care of themselves, understand their role and relationship changes and bond with their baby.
- There are some helpful things you can do to reduce your chance of getting postnatal depression. If you are experiencing anxiety and depression you are not alone. You should talk to your maternal and child health nurse or doctor as soon as possible or contact mental health services.

Self-care strategies for parents and caregivers

Early childhood is a very exciting, happy and rewarding time of life. However, it can sometimes be stressful, exhausting and worrying. Having young children can often bring up different emotions and challenges for parents and caregivers.

It may seem like all of your energy is focused on your child, and you can forget to look after yourself. Even if you may not seem to have the time it’s important to take care of you. If you are happy and healthy you will be able to be a better mother, father or partner. We sometimes call this self-care and there are many different strategies you can use to help you stay in good physical and mental health. You can do self-care at any time, such as when your child is sleeping or when they are being cared for by a trusted friend or family member.

Don’t think of these strategies as a ‘to-do’ list – instead, they are practical things you can do to improve your wellbeing. Here are some activities you may find helpful.

How to get enough sleep

If you are having trouble sleeping or not getting enough sleep, try these suggestions:

- Go to bed at the same time each day.
- Avoid exercise before bed.
- Make the bedroom as restful an environment as possible.
- Avoid screen time or other stimulating activities just before bed.
- Avoid caffeine or other stimulants in the evening.
- Try a warm bath or shower two hours before bed to regulate your body temperature for sleep.
- Avoid a nap in the evening.
- If you cannot sleep, get up and do something quiet in another room.
- Short 20-minute naps can improve alertness and help you make better decisions.

Make time for some physical activity

Regular physical activity is important for our overall health and wellbeing. It improves our fitness, helps us...
maintain a healthy weight, while reducing our risk for many chronic diseases. If you are not sure how to start or find it hard to make the time, remember:

- To set achievable goals depending on your personal circumstances, previous exercise history and physical health (especially if you are recovering from the birth).
- Fresh air and sunshine can lift mood and boost vitamin D.
- Schedule exercise time in your day. If it is difficult to find some time alone, take a short walk in the morning with your child in a pram or pusher.
- Exercise can include gentler activities – such as breathing exercises, meditation or yoga.
- Physiotherapists can help with assessment, treatment and strengthening exercises.

Look after your dietary needs

Many parents and caregivers of young children, can struggle to find the time to cook, stay hydrated and to eat healthily. Suggestions include:

- Have small, protein-based snacks (such as yoghurt or nuts) on hand if you struggle to find time to prepare food during the day.
- Keep a bottle of water nearby as dehydration can make you feel irritable and tired.
- Set manageable goals for your family and allow for something easy like toasted sandwiches or eggs on toast on difficult days.

Making friends and connecting with others

New and existing social networks can help new parents feel connected to other adults. Some suggestions to maintain and develop social networks include:

- First-time parent groups.
- Joining a playgroup.
- Free local activities, like story time at the local library.
- Using social media, such as joining supportive Facebook communities.

Be kind to yourself

It’s important to be kind to yourself. It’s ok to feel frustrated or scared sometimes. It can be helpful to:

- Write in a diary or journal.
- Speak to your partner, a close friend or family member if you’re able to.
- Write a list of things you’re grateful for or proud of every day.

Take some time out

Parents and caregivers need a break from caring from time to time. This also allows another person to have some one-on-one time with the baby. Suggestions for time out include:

- Establishing a set time for an activity each week.
- Doing an enjoyable hobby or craft.
- Having a relaxing bath. Generally, you’ll get the most benefit from time out if the rest of the family is out of the house.
- Going for a walk.
- Going shopping.
- Reading a book or magazine.
- Watching a movie.
- Catching up with friends.
- Having a massage or pedicure.

Seek support for your mental health
Suggestions include:

- Be aware and informed about common mental health conditions (such as anxiety and depression), that may occur during pregnancy and after having a baby.
- Talk about your mental health concerns with family or friends (if you feel comfortable).
- Talk to your maternal and child health nurse or call the Maternal and Child Health Line on Tel: 13 22 29.
- Talk to your doctor or GP.
- See a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or counsellor.
- Call a helpline, such as Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA) or Parentline.

**Relationship support for parents and caregivers**

**Becoming a parent** can enhance and strengthen the bond with your partner, however, it will bring new challenges.

Relationship issues can include:

- Difficulties adapting to parenthood, such as disagreements around traditional gender roles.
- Society’s expectations of mothers and fathers.
- Division of household chores and child care.
- A reduction in relationship equality, sex and intimacy.
- An increase in conflict.

If you need relationship advice and support, there are organisations such as [Relationships Australia](#) to help you adapt to parenthood.

It can also be helpful to speak to your maternal and child health nurse, doctor or a counsellor.

**Support is available for dads too**

Parenting doesn’t come easy for most of us and many dads can find becoming a new parent challenging. You are adjusting to a new role as a father, your relationship has changed, and it may be hard to communicate or find some intimacy with your partner with the arrival of a new little person. You also may not know how to bond with your new baby.

The following organisations can help dads:

- [Relationships Australia](#) - has resources for fathers that focus on the role of dads, the relationship between dad and their partner and the bond between dad and his child.
- [The Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE)](#) has a guide for expectant and new dads.
- [Raising Children website](#) also has information specifically for dads, from pregnancy through to the birth and growth of your baby.
- [Beyond Blue](#) has information to help dads take care of their own health and wellbeing.

**Postnatal mental health**

Some mothers experience anxiety and depression after the birth of their baby. Fathers and non-birth parents are also at risk, particularly if their partner has a mental health condition.

One in six mothers and one in 10 fathers experience [postnatal depression](#), and one in five women experience postnatal anxiety in the first year after the birth of their baby.

If you are experiencing anxiety and depression you are not alone. Talk to your maternal and child health nurse or doctor as soon as possible or contact the mental health services listed in this factsheet.

**Reducing your risk of postnatal depression**

Some factors may reduce your risk of postnatal depression, include:

- Having strong support networks – including family, friends, community, connections with other new parents.

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[betterhealth.vic.gov.au](#)
having a positive sense of identity and cultural heritage.

- Being physically healthy and able to take care of yourself (including exercising, eating well and reducing stress where possible).
- Having a friend or relative you can call or share your experiences with.
- Having good problem-solving skills.
- Being optimistic – a belief that life has meaning and hope.
- Having a positive attitude to seeking support.
- Having access to support services.

**Postnatal depression risk factors**

It is not known exactly what causes postnatal depression, but you may be more at risk if you have:

- A personal or family history of mental health problems (such depression and anxiety).
- Increased current life stresses – for example moving to a new house, relationship difficulties or having a baby with special care needs,
- A lack of practical, social or emotional support.
- Alcohol and drug misuse.
- A history of abuse (physical, sexual or emotional)
- An anxious or perfectionist personality.

**Common postnatal mental health conditions**

The following table outlines some common postnatal mental health conditions that can be experienced by parents and caregivers, but there are also many other symptoms not listed here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Signs and symptoms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baby blues</td>
<td>• Being teary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Irritability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Being overly sensitive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Fatigue</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Frequent mood changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(such as first-time parent groups).
| Postnatal depression can develop after the birth of your baby and up to one year. It usually happens due to a combination of factors. | Low self-esteem and lack of confidence  
Feeling inadequate or guilty  
Negative thoughts  
Feeling that life is meaningless  
Feeling unable to cope  
Feeling tearful or irritable  
Difficulty sleeping or changes in sleeping patterns  
Low sex drive  
Difficulty concentrating or remembering things  
Loss or changes in appetite |
|---|---|
| Perinatal and postnatal anxiety can develop after the birth of your baby. Anxiety is a broad term for conditions that have a number of common symptoms. Postnatal anxiety and depression are commonly experienced together. | Feelings of fear and worry that ‘take over’ your thinking  
Feeling irritable, restless, tense or constantly on edge  
Racing heart / strong palpitations, including panic attacks  
Reoccurring worrying thoughts, for example you’re not doing things right or something terrible will happen  
Unable to sleep, even when you have the opportunity  
Avoiding situations because you’re afraid something bad will happen |

**Other mental health conditions experienced by mothers**

As well as these common mental health conditions some women might experience other more serious mental health conditions either during pregnancy or after the birth of their child.

A previous mental health history or the presence of risk factors may result in a greater risk of having, relapsing or exacerbating a mental health condition. These risk factors include; life stressors (family violence, loss or disability), multiple trauma or isolation (by distance or culture).

This can lead to an increased risk of severe mental health illness, such as psychotic disorders, like *schizophrenia*, postpartum *psychosis* and *bipolar disorder* during the pregnancy or after the birth.

**Where to get mental health support**

**Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA)**

**Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA)** offers free telephone counselling from 9.00 am to 7.30 pm, Monday to Friday. Phone 1300 726 306.

Visit the website for checklists, fact sheets and information translated into five languages other than English.

PANDA also suggests these options to seek help:

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**betterhealth.vic.gov.au**
- maternal and child health nurse or the MCH line
- doctor (to enable access to the mental health plan if required)
- midwife or obstetrician
- early parenting centres
- relationship counsellors
- mother–baby units
- MindMum – an app designed to help the emotional wellbeing of expecting and new mothers
- MumMoodBooster – a free online treatment program for postnatal anxiety and depression based on cognitive behavioural therapy. You can do this program at own pace, and you do not need a diagnosis to access it
- community-based playgroups and support groups
- emergency department, if urgent support is required.

Centre of Perinatal Excellence (CoPE)

The Centre of Perinatal Excellence (CoPE) has in-depth information on a range of emotional and mental health challenges faced by parents in pregnancy, birth and postnatal periods.

CoPE also provides the latest evidence for identifying, treating and managing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and other severe mental health disorders.

The site has resources for parents and caregivers experiencing mental health conditions, such as factsheets on symptoms and where and when to access support and treatment.

Resources include:
- CoPE factsheets for women and their families
- CoPE factsheets for health professionals

Beyond Blue

Beyond Blue provides information relating to pregnancy and parenting, covering topics from bonding with your baby, to spotting the signs of anxiety and depression.

Information topics include:
- becoming a parent – what to expect
- maternal mental health and wellbeing
- advice – for new and expectant dads
- ‘Just speak up’, a forum for sharing personal stories about postnatal anxiety and depression
- ‘Mental health checklist for mums’, a checklist to help you find out whether you might be experiencing postnatal anxiety and depression.

Clinical mental health treatment for mothers

The Perinatal Emotional Health Program provides treatment for women at risk of or experiencing mental illness in the perinatal period. The perinatal period is from pregnancy until the end of the first year after birth. As the impact of perinatal mental illness extends beyond the woman herself, the treatment is for the family.

Six health services in Victoria also have Parent Infant Units where women with severe mental illness during the perinatal period can receive clinical treatment in a residential setting. A team of highly trained staff provides care for you and your baby under the direction of a psychiatrist.

Your doctor or Maternal Child and Health Nurse can refer you to the Perinatal Emotional Health Program or a Parent Infant Unit. These services are also accessible through the mental health triage service. Each public mental health service in Victoria provides a psychiatric triage and referral service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Where to get help
- Your local maternal and child health service
• **Your GP (doctor)**

• **Maternal and Child Health Line** Tel: 13 22 29 – available 24 hours a day for the cost of a local call throughout Victoria

• **Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)** Tel. 03 9419 3000

• **Parentline** Tel. 13 22 89

• **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National)** Tel. 131 450 – available (24 hours, 7 days a week) for callers who speak other languages

• **National Relay Service** (24 hours a day, every day) – Speak and listen Tel: 1300 555 727, TTY Tel: 133 677, SMS relay Tel: 0423 677 767. [Captioned, internet and video relay calls are also available through this service](#).

• **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

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