

How does my Mental Health affect my baby?



Pregnancy and the first few months after birth can be full of joy and a sense of connection, but for most expectant and new parents, it also comes with its challenges.

Approximately 10-13% of birthing parents worldwide experience mental illness during pregnancy or following childbirth, (WHO, 2016) and up to 80% experience “Baby Blues”.

When you, as a parent, are struggling with daily tasks and your own sense of wellbeing, it can also affect your child's growth and development. To get through this sensitive time, all parents deserve the support they need for their mental health, for their own benefit and for the benefit of their baby.

Your baby's mental health begins at conception

From pregnancy to parenthood, your mental health is linked to your baby's development

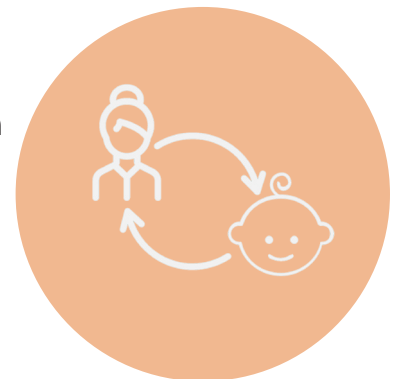
- ◆ Just as nutrition in pregnancy contributes to a baby's growth, your baby is affected by your experience of stress in pregnancy. Your body responds to stress by releasing a hormone called cortisol, which passes to your baby through the placenta. Research has found that this can lead to a higher stress response in infants and children.
- ◆ This can feel like a great responsibility, but it also tells us that it's never too early to get support for your own mental health. If you can address your common stressors and any feelings of depression and anxiety in pregnancy, it will benefit baby once she/he is born. Speak with your primary health care practitioner about your options for assessment and treatment, and/or resources in your community.



Making connections with your baby

The experiences you share with your baby create the base for their brain development into adulthood.

- ◆ It may seem that there's not a lot going on for this new baby who cannot yet talk or walk, but there is fast and important brain development taking place from the start. From the moment your baby is born, her/his brain is capable of making over a million brain cell connections every second.
- ◆ Noticing and sensitively responding to your baby when she/he is distressed lets baby develop trust and feel secure and safe in her/his relationship with you. Your response helps to create new connections in baby's brain, and strengthen the connections that are already there. This helps baby develop tools for learning, appropriate behaviour, and connected relationships now and into the future.



- ◆ Consistent and positive responses to your baby's communication – like when baby smiles and coos, you smile and coo back at baby – are essential to the growth and development of your baby's brain. Your baby counts on you to help her/him navigate her/his emotional experiences through your responses.
- ◆ If you are in a state of chronic stress, however, it will affect how you respond to your baby. It can be really hard to smile and make eye contact when you are feeling depressed or anxious yourself.



Stress management is a vital skill for all parents

Taking steps to manage your stress and improve your mental health will benefit your whole family.

- ◆ There are plenty of triggers for stress in pregnancy and after birth – from a change in hormone levels, to sudden reduction in your daily sleep, to the relationships in your life, and feelings about becoming a parent.
- ◆ Realistically, no one can provide perfectly responsive and sensitive care to their child 100% of the time. Responding to your child more often than not, and working at understanding the type of response baby needs, is completely appropriate.
- ◆ Your own mental health plays a big part in having the capacity to respond to your baby consistently and sensitively. It is important for all parents to call on supports and develop strategies to reduce your sense of overwhelm:
 - Ask your partner, a family member or a friend to give you a break: take a nap, a bath, or a walk.
 - Practice mindfulness in a way that works for you (ex: becoming attuned to your breath as you're feeding your baby, or getting outdoors for some fresh air and sun).
 - Confide in someone who you trust and is an empathic listener.



When you develop and practice healthy coping skills with support and practice, you have a greater capacity to foster connections with your baby through attuned caregiving and positive interactions.

If you are struggling to cope, or you are having strong negative feelings about your baby or your role as a parent, it is important to talk to your doctor or another caring professional who you trust.

