

# Supporting Mental Wellbeing During Pregnancy: Understanding and Managing Mental Health



## Highlights

It's just as important to look after your mental health and wellbeing during pregnancy as your physical health.

If you are mentally healthy, you will be in the best position to manage the challenges of pregnancy and life with a new baby.

Some expectant parents develop mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety during pregnancy.

You should see your doctor or midwife if your mental health is affecting your ability to function or if you have a low mood lasting two weeks or longer.

Getting enough rest, exercising, eating healthy meals, and reducing stress will all help you maintain your mental wellbeing during pregnancy.

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## **Mental Wellbeing**

The term "mental wellbeing" refers to your state of mind.

Good mental health and wellbeing allow you to feel confident in dealing with life's challenges.

Poor mental health can make it difficult to cope with day-to-day life, including how you handle stress, work, and relationships.

## **How Pregnancy Affects Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Pregnancy and preparing for a baby is an exciting but also challenging time. Don't be surprised if you experience emotional changes.

It's normal to have some worries and fears about what's ahead. You may feel stressed, especially as it is a big change that you cannot fully prepare for or control.

Pregnancy itself can be stressful. Hormonal and physical changes may trigger strong emotions and mood swings. You may also feel worried about prenatal tests or past negative experiences such as a miscarriage.

Common concerns include:

- Will my baby be healthy?
- Worries about labor
- Concerns about your changing body
- Emotional changes
- Relationship adjustments
- Career impact

Mental health conditions are common in pregnancy, affecting up to 1 in 5 expecting or new mothers. Non-birthing parents' mental health can also be

impacted when adjusting to changes during pregnancy.

## **Mental Health Conditions During Pregnancy**

For some people, pregnancy and the year following birth can lead to conditions such as:

Depression

Anxiety

Other less common conditions include:

Bipolar disorder

Postnatal psychosis

Schizophrenia

These conditions are more likely to affect individuals who have had a pre-existing mental health condition.

Both partners can experience mental health challenges during pregnancy (the antenatal period) as well as after birth (the postnatal period), including perinatal anxiety or depression.

## **Risk Factors for Mental Health During Pregnancy**

Certain factors can increase the risk of developing anxiety and depression during pregnancy. These include:

A previous mental health condition

Family history of mental health issues

Lack of adequate support

Going through difficulties such as relationship problems or job loss

Past or current abuse (physical, psychological, or sexual)

Problems with drugs or alcohol

Mental health problems are common. Anyone can experience them-it's nothing to be ashamed of.

## **Symptoms of Perinatal Anxiety and Depression**

Symptoms of perinatal anxiety and depression include:

- Constant worrying, including fears for the baby's health
- Feeling sad, low, or crying for no obvious reason
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Losing interest in things that usually bring you joy
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep problems
- Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby

Males can experience the same or different symptoms, which may include:

- Agitation
- Frustration
- Outbursts of anger or rage
- Feelings of shame or guilt

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger of self-harm or harming others, seek emergency assistance immediately.

## **When to See Your Doctor or Midwife**

While pregnancy comes with natural ups and downs, it's important to seek professional advice if you experience one or more of the following:

- Feeling low in mood, sad, or worried for two weeks or longer
- Negative thoughts and emotions affecting daily functioning
- Signs of depression, such as losing interest in things or feeling hopeless
- Persistent anxiety or constant worry
- Panic attacks or obsessive-compulsive behaviors
- Thoughts of harming yourself or the baby

All expecting parents should monitor their mental health and wellbeing, recognize signs that they may need help, and take action if necessary.

## **Managing Mental Wellbeing During Pregnancy**

There are many ways to support your mental health and wellbeing during pregnancy:

Be realistic about your expectations and rest when needed.

Avoid making major life changes unless necessary.

Stay physically active (consult your doctor or midwife before starting an exercise program).

Eat regular, nutritious meals.

Spend time with supportive and positive people.

Avoid drugs or alcohol as coping mechanisms.

Connect with other expectant parents for mutual support.

Accept help when offered and ask for help when needed.

## **Tools And Assistance**

If you are struggling with mental health during pregnancy, several tools and support systems can help you manage and improve your wellbeing:

**Talk to Your Support System:** Open communication with your partner, family, or friends can provide emotional support and reassurance. They can help ease the pressure by sharing your concerns and providing a safe space to express your feelings.

**Therapy and Counseling:** Speaking to a therapist or counselor can help you better understand and manage your emotions. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT) are common treatments for managing mental health during pregnancy.

**Pregnancy Support Groups:** Support groups, whether in person or online, can connect you with other expectant parents who may be experiencing similar challenges. These groups provide an opportunity to share experiences, advice, and strategies for coping with pregnancy-related stress.

**Mindfulness and Relaxation:** Practicing mindfulness, meditation, or relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises can significantly reduce anxiety and stress. These practices help you stay grounded and calm in the face of overwhelming emotions.

**Stress Reduction Techniques:** Regular physical activity, such as walking, prenatal yoga, or stretching, can help you manage stress. Exercise releases endorphins, which improve mood and energy levels.

**Nutrition and Rest:** Maintaining a balanced diet and ensuring you get enough rest are crucial for mental wellbeing. Eating nourishing meals can help stabilize your mood, and adequate sleep helps restore your body and mind, improving your ability to cope with emotional challenges.

**Professional Help for Medication:** In some cases, medication may be necessary to help manage anxiety or depression during pregnancy. A healthcare provider can assess the risks and benefits and determine the best approach for you and your baby.

**Educating Yourself About Mental Health:** Learning more about the mental health conditions that can arise during pregnancy, such as anxiety or depression, can help you recognize symptoms early and seek help sooner. Understanding that these conditions are common can also reduce stigma and increase the likelihood of seeking support.

**Hotlines and Helplines:** Many regions have dedicated hotlines or helplines for individuals experiencing mental health challenges during pregnancy. These services offer confidential support, advice, and assistance from trained professionals.

**Practice Self-Compassion:** Be gentle with yourself and recognize that it's okay to ask for help. Pregnancy is a significant life change, and taking care of your mental health is just as important as physical health. Acknowledge your feelings without judgment and seek help when needed.