

# Transition to Parenthood: Packing for the Emotional Journey

*If you know you have a lot to carry, try leaving a few things behind, get a good backpack or maybe grab a luggage cart, build up your strength, and plan to get help carrying the load.*

## Emotional Changes and Challenges

Pregnancy and the early months of parenting bring so many changes: physical changes that affect everything from what you can eat to how much you sleep, radical shifts in your daily routines, financial challenges, changes in identity – how others view you and how you view yourself, possible relationship conflicts, and non-stop new learning and decision-making.

All of that can have a huge impact on your mood. Sometimes pregnancy and birth bring a lot of joys, but they can also create a lot of stress. Expect that from time to time, you'll experience pregnancy blues or baby blues – everyone has times of feeling overwhelmed, anxious, sad, or angry. Everyone can benefit by learning ways to reduce and manage these emotional challenges.

For some people, this phase of life is even harder. 15 – 20% of pregnant or postpartum people may experience Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMAD's), and 5% of non-gestational parents do. PMAD's such as depression, anxiety, OCD, or PTSD and can happen during pregnancy, or postpartum (after the birth of the baby). It is helpful during pregnancy to evaluate your risk factors for PMAD, practice self-care to reduce your risk, and make plans for how you'll get more support if needed.

## Risk Factors for PMAD

Some people are lucky and have few risk factors. Some have a lot, and not much control over any of them.

Think of these as baggage. If you don't have many of them, you can probably manage the load without much support or planning. But if you have a lot of risk factors, it's absolutely worth putting as many protective factors in place as possible to help you carry it all without being overwhelmed.

History of Mental Health Challenges: Depression, Anxiety, PMAD, etc. in self or close family members; eating disorders; substance use; history of abuse or trauma; adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Challenges with Menstruation, Pregnancy or Birth: History of severe PMS; history of infertility, miscarriage or stillbirth; unplanned or unwanted pregnancy; high needs baby, baby with health conditions, multiples; breastfeeding challenges.

Current Life Stresses: Recent death in the family; move to a new home; changing jobs or losing a job; workplace stress; getting married, separated, or divorced; domestic violence; financial pressures; partner currently experiencing a PMAD.

Demographics: teenager; person of color; low income; single parent; LGBTQIA.

Lack of Support: Poor or absent relationship with partner, family, friends. Minimal community connections.

Health Issues: Thyroid disease, diabetes, anemia, inflammation, sleep disruptions, complicated pregnancy.



## Protective Factors / Prevention

Try any of these options to build your strength to make it easier to bear the challenges of this time:

- Take good care of your body: Get as much sleep as you need, exercise, get fresh air and sunshine, avoid alcohol and tobacco, and eat a healthy diet (including plenty of iron). Omega 3 supplements can reduce inflammation which reduces risk of PMAD.
- Lighten your load if possible: If there's anything you can do to reduce stress at home or at work, or take on fewer responsibilities, make those healthy choices for you and for baby.
- Learn skills for stress reduction: Change the way you think about things (see the Mothers and Babies resource below), practice mindfulness, learn relaxation techniques or use guided meditation.
- Prioritize healthy relationships: Strengthen your ties to people who care for and support you, reduce contact with unhealthy relationships. Learn about and practice effective communication skills, conflict resolution and how to ask for support. Consider relationship counseling if needed.
- Develop a social support system: learn about local resources for parents, don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Learn about PMAD's: page 9 of STRONG Kit; <https://perinatal-support.org/perinatal-mental-health-resources/>

## Building Skills (they're like a backpack to help you carry your baggage differently and more easily)

Mothers and Babies program – Offers concrete tools to manage stress and improve your mood, including reframing how you think about stressors, reducing negative thinking, and seeking support from others. The booklet was designed to accompany a class, but many parts are useful on their own. [https://mbp.columbian.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1906/f/downloads/MBC\\_6W\\_Class.pdf?pdf=6-Week-Participant-English](https://mbp.columbian.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1906/f/downloads/MBC_6W_Class.pdf?pdf=6-Week-Participant-English)

The STRONG Kit: This booklet addresses myths about parenting to help you to develop more reasonable expectations; offers info on PMAD and ideas for getting support; tips for baby care. [https://www.ideas4kidsmentalhealth.org/uploads/7/8/5/3/7853050/strongmomskit\\_1.7.16.pdf](https://www.ideas4kidsmentalhealth.org/uploads/7/8/5/3/7853050/strongmomskit_1.7.16.pdf)

## Screening Tools—when you're feeling overloaded...

If you're not feeling like yourself, and wondering if you need support, use one of these easy tools:

EPDS—Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale: there's a PDF at <https://www.fresno.ucsf.edu/pediatrics/downloads/edinburghscale.pdf> or an online calculator at <https://psychology-tools.com/test/epds>.

PHQ-9—Personal Health Questionnaire. PDF at <https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/PHQ-9.pdf>; online calculator <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/phq-9>

## Asking Family and Friends to Help You Carry the Load

If you score 5 or under on the screening tools, you're likely doing fine! A score of 6 to 9 may be the Blues. Talk with friends and family about how you're feeling. Get help with baby care or housework. Try building a **SNOWBALL**: Sleep, Nutrition, Omega 3's, Walks, Breaks, Adult Time, Liquids (Water), Laughter.

## Treatment—Getting Outside Support

Any score higher than 10 indicates you may be experiencing a PMAD and would benefit from one of more of these treatment options *in addition* to the self-care options above. A score higher than 20 indicates an urgent need—seek treatment as soon as possible.

- Support Groups / Peer Counseling
- Counseling, ideally with a therapist who specializes in PMAD
- Medication – and education about medication
- Doctor's appointment to rule out – thyroid, hormone imbalance, anemia, nutritional deficiencies

