

# The Emotional Journey of the Perinatal Period

## 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, possible relationship conflicts, non-stop new learning and decision-making, and changes in your very identity – how others view you and how you view yourself.

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. It is normal and expected that from time to time, you'll experience pregnancy blues or baby blues – everyone has times of feeling overwhelmed, anxious, sad, or angry. These moods sweep in suddenly, then pass in a few days or a few weeks. But they can be intense. Everyone can benefit by learning ways to reduce and manage these emotional challenges.

For some people, this phase is even harder. Perhaps they're tired all the time but can't sleep, terribly sad, hopeless, or convinced they are a bad parent. Perhaps they are anxious, hyper-alert, panicky, or extremely concerned about the baby's well-being. Perhaps they worry about harming themselves or the baby.

Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMAD's), such as depression, anxiety, OCD, or PTSD and can happen during pregnancy or postpartum (after the birth of the baby). 15 – 20% of pregnant or postpartum people may experience (PMAD's), and 5% of non-gestational parents do. It is helpful during pregnancy to evaluate your risk factors, practice self-care and put protective factors in place 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. Risk factors include:

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

Challenges with Menstruation, Pregnancy, Birth, or Parenting: 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: Being a teenager; person of color; low income; single parent; and/or 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.

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



## 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 sleep, exercise, get fresh air and sunshine, avoid alcohol / tobacco, and eat a healthy diet (with enough iron). Omega 3 supplements may reduce 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.

## 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://www.mothersandbabiesprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/6-Week-Instructor-Manual-2017-1.pdf>

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. [http://www.ideas4kidsmentalhealth.org/uploads/7/8/5/3/7853050/strongmomskit\\_2.18.16.pdf](http://www.ideas4kidsmentalhealth.org/uploads/7/8/5/3/7853050/strongmomskit_2.18.16.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: PDF at <https://med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/neonatology/documents/edinburghscale.pdf>; 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 a **SNOWBALL**: Sleep, Nutrition, Omega 3's, Walks, Breaks, Adult Time, Liquids (Water), Laughter.

## Treatment—Getting Outside Support

A score higher than 10 indicates you may have a PMAD and would benefit from one of more of these treatment options *in addition* to the self-care options above.

- 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 or hormone imbalance, anemia, nutritional deficiencies

A score higher than 20 indicates an urgent need—seek treatment as soon as possible. The sooner you get help, the sooner you'll begin your journey to wellness.

