

Managing your mental health as a parent

Becoming a parent is an exciting time in your life, but it can also come with a host of challenges to your mental health.

For birthing parents, this can include having to manage physical complications and difficulties that may arise from childbirth and breastfeeding. For both parents, dealing with sleep deprivation, sensory overload, new stresses in your relationship and lack of free time can also be challenging.¹

Because of these numerous stresses, depression and anxiety in new parents is common. Up to 1 in 5 mothers and 1 in 10 fathers experience postnatal anxiety or depression.²

If you've recently become a parent, it's important to take care of your mental health as best you can. Here are some key areas you may want to focus on to support your wellbeing.

Sleep

As a new parent, it's important to prioritise sleep so you feel more energized and equipped to take care of your child. Not getting enough sleep can increase your risk of developing a mental health condition, and can worsen any anxiety or stress you may be feeling.³

Unfortunately, getting your usual eight hours' sleep at night may not be an option as your newborn adjusts to a normal sleep schedule, so you may need to 'get creative' when it comes to logging your sleep hours. You could sleep in in the morning if you're not currently working, go to bed early if your child sleeps better in the earlier hours of the night, or try and offload some daily tasks such as cooking so you can fit in a nap during the day.

Mindfulness

It may be challenging with all the demands on your time, but try to take even a minute or two out of your day to process and accept any feelings that you are experiencing, even if they are negative ones. Mindfulness can be a powerful technique that can

help you react more calmly in moments of stress and reduce your anxiety over time.⁴ For more on mindfulness techniques, see our previous article here.

Remember, taking care of a baby is a difficult thing to do and it is common to sometimes feel upset, angry or overwhelmed.

Support

It's best to be prepared for the fact that, particularly in the early days, parenting will take up most of your time. Have a think about what daily tasks you can outsource, such as cooking, cleaning or taking care of pets, so you can focus on looking after your child without feeling stressed about other chores piling up.

You may also need support to deal with some of the physical and mental demands of parenting. There are a range of experts that cover this space, such as lactation consultants for help with breastfeeding, sleep consultants to help with restless sleepers, and psychologists who specialise in postpartum and new parents.

Family and friends can also help to provide support, even if it's just to keep you company for half an hour.

Health

It's easy to forget to care for yourself when caring for a baby, but eating healthy foods and getting some exercise can help you to sleep better and cope with the more challenging days of parenthood.

You may want to look into a meal delivery service to ensure you're getting all the nutrition you need without needing to shop for and cook meals. Taking a walk outside each day is also an easy way to get exercise, and exposure to sunlight can help set your baby up for better sleep at night.⁵

1 Looking after yourself: Parents and carers of babies and children. Australian Government - Raising Children Network, 2023

2 Perinatal Mental Health Week. PANDA 2023

3 How sleep deprivation impacts mental health. Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, 16 March 2022

4 Mindfulness meditation: A research-proven way to reduce stress. American Psychological Association, 30 October 2019

5 Typical sleep behaviour - newborns 0 to 3 months. Victorian Government Department of Health, 27 March 2023

