

Postnatal Depression – things you can do to help yourself

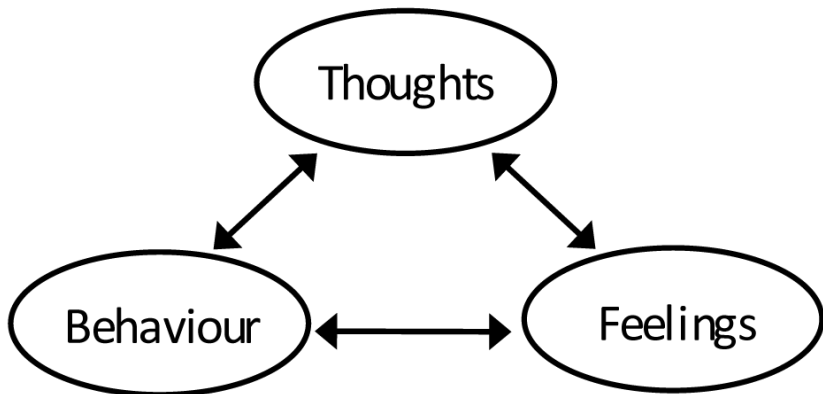


Postnatal depression (PND) is a distressing condition experienced by at least one in ten mothers. PND can develop slowly without you recognizing it. Mothers often believe that they are just not coping, rather than recognizing that they are suffering from PND.

This leaflet will help you to think about ways in which you can **help yourself** overcome depression. Your psychologist will also help you to think about these ideas and how you can put them into practice. It also suggests other sources of support.

One of the symptoms of PND is finding it hard to concentrate. This may apply to reading this information, so please don't worry – just take it a little at a time.

The practical ideas here are based on a psychological treatment known as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (or CBT for short). This is based on the idea that our thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all linked together, as shown in the following diagram:



Just “changing how you feel” isn't easy. Because our feelings are linked to and affected by our thoughts and behaviour, changing how we **think** about situations, or what we **do**, will make a difference to how we feel.

First Steps

The first few steps in recovery are often the hardest. These steps may include:

- Realizing / accepting that there is something wrong.
- Plucking up the courage to talk to someone (e.g. partner, friend, family member, specialist cleft nurse, your GP, health visitor etc.) about how you are feeling.
- Remembering that you **will** get better.

There are also many practical things you can do that may make you feel better, such as:

- Make an effort to see your friends or to meet other mothers.
- Take up every offer of practical help – don't be ashamed to ask for help, or feel guilty about taking it.
- Try to get as much rest as you can, as tiredness makes depression worse.
- Find time for yourself. Although this may sound unrealistic, relaxing in a bath, going for a walk or reading a magazine for half an hour makes a lot of difference.
- Do not try to be the perfect housewife! Whether or not the house is spotless is not important; instead keep your workload as small as possible.
- Make sure you are eating healthily.
- Exercise – this has been found to be particularly helpful, and is as beneficial as antidepressant medication for mild depression.

Pleasure and achievement

When people have PND they often feel like that they cannot cope with all the things that need to be done around the house, with their baby etc. Remember to be realistic about how much you can do. Things that seemed easy before you had PND may feel much harder now. Try not to compare what you can do now with what you could have done before. Instead try to think about all the chores you have achieved and activities you've done, and whether you enjoyed them.

Write a list of all the things that you have done and give each completed activity a **pleasure rating** out of 10 (did you enjoy it?) and an **achievement rating** out of 10 (are you pleased you have done it?). Bear in mind that pleasure and achievement don't necessarily go together. Some activities are pleasurable, but don't give a sense of achievement (such as eating a bar of chocolate), whereas others are not necessarily pleasurable, but they give you a sense of achievement (e.g. a household chore).

Try not to be modest. Women with PND tend not to take credit for their achievements. When you are depressed, doing anything can be a challenge and should be recognized and rewarded.

Make sure you balance pleasure activities and achievement activities. When you're feeling low and lacking in motivation, it can be easy to let enjoyable activities slip, and devote all your energy to doing the essential tasks. However, spending all your time on chores can make life seem gloomy. It is important to prioritize your time and energy for pleasure as well as achievement activities.

Tackling negative thoughts

When people have PND they tend to think in a negative or gloomy way. This plays a crucial role in keeping their mood low. The first step in tackling these negative thoughts is to record them. Try writing down the thoughts that make you feel sad, guilty, helpless, anxious etc.

Sometimes people find that by recording their thoughts they notice them a lot more and this can feel a bit overwhelming. But it is important to try to do this. Once you have been able to recognize your thoughts we can help you to start exploring whether they are really true all of the time.

In the meantime, a simple way to tackle negative thoughts, once you notice that you are having them, is **distraction**. This leaves less room for them to buzz around in your brain all day. There are many little ways of keeping your brain busy. For example, counting all the red objects around you, repeating the words of a song in your mind etc. In order for distractors to be effective, you should really try to concentrate on them.

Eventually, you will be able to tackle these negative thoughts by challenging them. Often mothers take their thoughts as facts. For example, although some mothers may think "I am a bad mother and wife" or "If I go to the supermarket, my baby will cry and everyone will stare at me and be annoyed", these are just thoughts and not facts. When we are depressed we find it easier to think about the evidence that confirms our negative thoughts, rather than the evidence that suggests these thoughts aren't quite true.

Try to ensure that you are not making the following errors.

Over-generalizing

It may be that you draw big conclusions from small things. For example, if you snap at your child one day, you may think you are a terrible mother. Just because this happened once does not make you a terrible mother! There are lots of other things that you may do that make you a brilliant mother. Remember, when you're feeling depressed it can be harder to remember these good things, but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

"Black and white" thinking

This means seeing life in terms of extremes (black or white); e.g. a perfect mother or a terrible mother. Life is not like this, but is made up of "shades of grey". Try not to think in these two extremes. For example, mothers are very rarely perfect 100% of the time, or 100% wicked and uncaring. Most people are somewhere in between.

Fortune telling

This refers to the mistake of thinking you know what will happen in the future (e.g. if I go to baby clinic no one will speak to me and no one else's baby will cry). Unless you have plenty of evidence, based on a lot of actual experience, you don't know what will happen in the future. Even if you have tried something before, it is important to remember that things can change; next time it might be different. Try it out and see what exactly happens.

Mind reading

This means believing you know what other people are thinking, without actually having any good evidence (e.g. "My mother-in-law thinks that I am a really bad mother and wife."). We can't

actually **know** what someone else is thinking unless we ask them and they tell us.

If you find yourself making these, or similar, thought errors, try writing them down and then thinking of all the evidence that supports them and all the evidence against them. You may find it much easier to think of the evidence supporting your negative thoughts, but with time, you will hopefully find that thinking of the evidence against them gets a lot easier.

It can be hard work, but by collecting evidence about thoughts, most people find they can start to think about things in slightly different ways. Because our thoughts are linked to how we feel, changing your thinking will start to change how you feel. Remember it's a step by step process and gradually you will start to see signs of progress.

Some thoughts and feelings of mothers with postnatal depression

"I spend a lot of time in tears. I just can't get organized, the list of jobs that I need to do is so long. I feel a complete failure as a mother."

"I can't seem to make a decision. My mind is such a muddle of confused thoughts, and I feel like I am snapping at everyone all the time. I should feel happy, but I just feel miserable."

"The baby cries and cries and I just can't comfort her. I feel such a failure, but I get angry too. Then I feel unbearably guilty. It's not her fault, it's mine."

"I feel like I've totally lost my confidence. I look awful and I feel awful too."

How to contact us

The Spires Centre
Level LG1, Children's Hospital
John Radcliffe Hospital
Headley Way
Headington
Oxford OX3 9DU

Tel: 01865 234252

www.spirescentre.nhs.uk

Further information and support

Your local GP or Health Visitor

The Association of Postnatal Illness

This provides support for mothers with PND

Tel: 020 7386 0868

www.apni.org

Home-Start

Supporting families in the local communities across the UK

Tel: 0800 068 6368

www.home-start.org.uk

MAMA (Meet a Mum Association)

Offers one-to-one support groups, especially for isolated mothers.

Tel: 0845 120 3746

www.mama.co.uk

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call

01865 221473 or email **PALSJR@orh.nhs.uk**

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