

# SHORT GUIDE TO PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH

Caring for your psychological and emotional well-being  
during pregnancy and postpartum.



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WOMB RITES

# What is Perinatal Mental Health?

Perinatal mental health refers to the mother's psychological and emotional well-being during pregnancy and the first year after birth. Hormonal changes, lifestyle adjustments, and physical demands all impact the way her mind and body respond to the stress factors of pregnancy, birth, and early motherhood. These shifts can influence her mood, thoughts, energy levels, and overall sense of well-being.



*You are not sick!*

Depression is not a disease, it is a *symptom*. It is your brain's way of showing you that something in your general health or lifestyle needs more attention.

Some of these symptoms can manifest as:

- frequent crying
  - mood swings
  - irritability
  - extreme fatigue
  - difficulty concentrating
  - sleep problems
  - loss of sexual interest
  - pervasive anxiety
  - appetite changes, and eating disorders
  - negative, scary, obsessive thoughts
  - feelings of inadequacy
  - ruminating
  - hopelessness and despair
  - suicidal ideation
  - feelings of anger, rage, shame and guilt
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## Types of Perinatal Mood Disorders

1. **Baby Blues:** It is different from postpartum depression; it's a temporary, normal emotional state often caused by hormonal changes after childbirth. It usually goes away on its own within 2-3 weeks and may include symptoms like tearfulness, mood swings, fatigue, anxiety, irritability, and feeling overwhelmed.
  2. **Postpartum Depression (PPD):** It is a range of mood disorders, from mild to severe, that can extend well beyond the first four weeks postpartum and may persist throughout the first year. Symptoms include excessive weepiness, insomnia, fatigue, sadness, irritability, and suicidal thoughts. It is also commonly experienced as an agitated depression, as in the "wired and tired" mood.
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3. **Postpartum Anxiety:** The mother may suffer from constant worries, sleep problems, panic attacks, surges of dread and terror. Physical manifestations such as heart palpitations, chills, numbness, or dissociation from their bodies are also common.
4. **Adjustment Disorder:** Also known as postpartum stress syndrome, it can cause disruption in a mother's ability to adapt to the demands of motherhood. It typically resolves on its own but can lead to ongoing difficulties. Symptoms include stress, irritability, and moodiness. Reassurance and short-term therapy are effective treatments.
5. **Postpartum OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder):** Includes severe anxiety, compulsive behaviors, and obsessive thoughts related to caring for their newborn, such as timing naps and feedings. These can serve as a way for the mother to regain a sense of control amidst the challenges of postpartum depression.



6. **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** PTSD symptoms can be identified in some women, especially in those who have had a traumatic birth experience. Symptoms may include exaggerated emotional reactions, feelings of detachment, hypervigilance, flashbacks, panic, nightmares, and avoidance of triggers related to the traumatic event.
7. **Grief Reaction:** Grieving mothers who have experienced or are currently experiencing perinatal loss, unexpected or complicated birth outcomes will likely exhibit depressive symptoms. It is important to evaluate whether it is evolving into a clinical depression.
8. **Postpartum Psychosis:** Typically occurs within weeks of childbirth and poses a risk for infanticide and suicide. Symptoms can include delusions, detachment from reality, bizarre behavior, hallucinations, and confusion. Severe postpartum depression can also lead to psychotic symptoms. Mood symptoms may be present but are not the main feature of psychosis.

“...most forms of depression are normal adaptations to stress... continual exposure to excess cortisol over time can lead to increased abdominal fat, bone loss, a suppressed immune system, fatigue...diabetes, heart disease, and full-blown depression.

— Kelly Brogan M.D.

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## *Facing the truth*

Facing the profound changes in your life and noticing that you don't feel quite like yourself is a powerful first step toward healing. It's natural to want to push through and "carry on," but allowing yourself to fully acknowledge and process these feelings is essential to finding relief and regaining balance.

## *How Can I Get Help?*

Do not underestimate what you are going through. Take it seriously and address it as quickly as possible, even if you think what you are experiencing is normal and will go away, it is always a good idea to open up to someone you trust and knows you well, or seeking professional advice. This will not only guarantee that someone is keeping an eye out for your well-being, while having an outside view of your situation, but it will also be a first step into expressing your thoughts and feelings.

- It can be extremely helpful to connect with other moms who truly get what you're feeling.
- Your midwife or doctor can provide medical and professional counseling, or refer you to a specialist.
- Don't hesitate to lean on family and friends for practical support—they will want to help however they can.

***Reaching out can feel hard, but it's a brave step toward feeling like yourself again!***



*Don't let this stop you!*

✓ **Guilt and Shame:** Many women feel guilty of their feelings, because of their own or external expectations. They are supposed to be feeling joyful and excited about their babies, right? Not necessarily. It is absolutely normal to feel fear, regret, and anger during pregnancy and postpartum — even for planned and desired pregnancies. What is not normal

is to be shamed for having such conflicting thoughts and feelings. ***You might be mortified to admit them, but holding it all in can be much more damaging*** if they start manifesting as harmful actions and behaviors towards yourself or others.

✓ **Abusive Partner:** One of the reasons why women do not open up about their mental health is intimate partner violence. If your partner has been emotionally, psychologically, physically, sexually or financially abusive to you, this might be the very reason why you are struggling with your mental health in the first place. Seek immediate help from someone who can come up with a strategic and safe way to exit the relationship and get you back on your feet. ***You will not be able to heal in an environment that is making you ill.***

## I've Reached Out For Help. Now What?

Once you have reached out to a trusted person, and you have been screened and diagnosed for your condition, you can now choose how you are going to approach this. It will depend on the gravity of your situation. If you have a psychotic condition, you will most likely need more interventions than someone who is going through the baby blues. Here are some tips to help you make an informed decision:

- **Find a care provider that aligns with your values and beliefs about health.** Ask potential providers about their approach to care, and don't hesitate to seek multiple opinions until you find the right fit. Bringing a trusted companion to your initial appointments can provide valuable insight. Remember: you are not obligated to follow any recommendations, and you have the right to refuse any treatment, medication, or intervention.
  - **Do nothing, "wait and see"**. Although this might not be feasible in severe cases, it is also true that a lot of perinatal mental health issues can improve over time without intervention. This does not mean that you should ignore your feelings or pretend that everything is fine. Rather, it means that you should allow yourself the space to accept and observe your emotions as you navigate through this challenging period. By taking a step back and allowing yourself time to process your thoughts and feelings, you may find that the muddy waters begin to clear on their own.
  - **Assess your body health as much as your mental health.** A lot of mental imbalances stem from other health conditions. A simple B12 deficiency can be causing you to feel depleted.
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## Conventional Treatments

- 1. Psychotherapy:** Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) helps identify and challenge negative thoughts; interpersonal therapy (IPT) improves communication and relationships; Psychodynamic Therapy explores unconscious processes; and Jungian Psychotherapy explores the deeper layers of the psyche through dream analysis and symbol interpretation.
- 2. Medication:** Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the main type of antidepressants prescribed for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Carefully consider the risks and benefits of medication use during this time for both the mother and baby. Work closely with your provider to create a personalized treatment plan and monitor your progress regularly.
- 3. Hormonal Therapy:** It involves using medications to balance hormones during pregnancy and postpartum. This therapy helps ease symptoms of anxiety and depression.



“We think (because our doctors think) that we need to “cure” the brain, but in reality we need to look at the whole body’s ecosystem: intestinal health, hormonal interactions, the immune system and autoimmune disorders, blood sugar balance, and toxicant exposure...

**The best way to heal our brains is to heal the bodies in which they reside.**

— Kelly Brogan M.D.

## Holistic Treatments

There is ample evidence indicating that the side effects of pharmaceuticals used to treat depression and anxiety often outweigh their benefits in the long term. In some cases, these medications may not even be effective, or could potentially exacerbate the patient's condition by leading to chemical dependency.

It is imperative to adopt lifestyle changes that address your whole body and self, even if medication is part of the treatment plan.



1. **Nutrition:** Maintaining good gut health and proper nutrition is essential during pregnancy and postpartum. When you are nourishing another human being, it is vital to prioritize nourishing yourself first. Through getting a Hair Tissue Mineral Analysis, following a nutrient-dense diet low in refined carbohydrates and sugar, and potentially incorporating supplementation, you can ensure that your body remains balanced and equipped to handle the additional demands of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding.



2. **Movement:** Gentle activities like walking, dancing, yoga, or swimming can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression by releasing feel-good hormones like endorphins. They also improve circulation, boost energy levels, alleviate discomforts, and promote better sleep.

3. **Meditation:** It seems obvious, but worth mentioning. Meditation is extremely helpful for releasing stress and anxiety. There is plenty of free content on YouTube such as guided meditations, deep-relaxation, breath work, mindfulness – you name it. Try them out and see which ones work for you.

4. **Herbal Allies:** Humans have been using plants as medicine for millennia. From kitchen herbs to entheogenic plants, choosing to work with them requires a very refined and sensitive approach. You can invite herbal medicine to work with you through a variety of ways: body oiling, salves, infusions, food, syrups, tinctures, essential oils, essences, and yoni steaming (never during pregnancy!). Always consult an experienced herbalist.
5. **Alternative Healing Techniques:** There are a myriad of healing modalities that address health in a holistic way. Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, EFT, Massage, Naturopathy, Homeopathy, Chiropractic, Craniosacral Therapy, and Energy Healing are just a few examples. These will more likely focus on treating the root cause rather than just the symptoms.
6. **Spirituality:** If bringing a new soul into the world is not a spiritual experience, then I don't know what is. Spirituality has nothing to do with religion or beliefs. It is about connecting to your inner truth, and finding joy in life. Whatever helps you with that is most certainly nourishing your spirit!





## Extra tips

- ✓ **Birth Story / Birth Debrief:** Telling your birth story, writing it down, or debriefing it with a person prepared to hold space for active listening can be a powerful healing step for processing the trauma of birth. Don't be fooled by labels and expectations. Even the most empowering, beautiful births can be stored as a trauma to the psyche or the body.
- ✓ **Group Therapy:** Finding a support group, or joining a safe Women's Circle might be good alternatives to psychotherapy. Being able to express your feelings freely and receive empathy back is healing on its own.
- ✓ **Closing Of The Bones Ceremony:** It is found in many cultures as a postpartum ritual to help the mother release the birth trauma and ground back into her body.
- ✓ **Art & Writing:** If expressing your feelings is easier through writing or art, you can use it as a way to tell your subconscious what is happening, and to organize your thoughts. It can also serve as a good tool to assess and document your journey though your healing process.

## Role of the Midwife or Primary Care Provider

Your midwife or primary care provider should offer routine screenings during and after pregnancy for identifying mood disorders as early as possible. Tools like the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) can help assess risk and detect symptoms. They can also offer valuable education on perinatal mental health, suggest lifestyle adjustments or holistic practices, and provide resources for therapy, support groups, and emergency contacts.

If your midwife or care provider are not taking your claims seriously, not offering any screening, or don't seem to be taking your emotional and mental health into account, consider addressing your concerns about their services, or transferring care.



*Call the midwife!*

Midwives are trusted advocates for women's health who offer continuous emotional support and care for women. They have a unique ability to understand their clients' intimate lives while also observing their overall health.

## Final Thoughts

Whether you are not experiencing any mental health issues or you are in the thick of it, I hope this short guide was able to condense the key points and tips for caring for your perinatal mental health. It is a broad and deep topic that cannot be generalized, but only addressed by carefully looking at each individual's specific situation.

Know that there are plenty of resources, loved ones ready and willing to help, and highly qualified professionals that can offer treatment.

Your health is in your hands, and you owe it to yourself to live a joyous and fulfilling life!



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## Resources & References

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<https://www.postpartumstress.com>

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