

Parent Mental Health and Wellbeing

Information for parents and families after their baby's admission to a neonatal unit

Having a baby born prematurely or unwell is a stressful experience for families and it's normal for parents to experience high levels of distress.

After the birth, there is often uncertainty and worry about the baby's and sometimes mother's health and parents and babies may be separated for extended periods of time.

During the early days and weeks, it's common for parents to experience a range of different emotions that can change from day to day.

For example, you may feel:

- worried
- anxious
- confused
- happy
- guilty
- sad
- powerless
- joyful
- frustrated
- angry
- overwhelmed
- relieved

Experiences for different family members

You and your family may have different emotions and sources of stress after your baby is born prematurely or unwell. If your baby has siblings, this can also be a challenging time for them. As well as adjusting to a new baby, they may experience separation from parents, changes to routine and increased stress.

Your emotional and mental health experiences are unique to you. However, we also know that almost half of parents of babies born before 32 weeks' gestation experience high levels of depression or anxiety symptoms shortly after their baby's birth. Some parents also experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Signs and symptoms of mental health difficulties such as depression or anxiety can be felt and shown in different ways. Symptoms may be felt within the body, through emotions such as sadness or fear, or they may involve big changes to usual routines and behaviours.

For many parents, symptoms of depression and anxiety reduce over time, while for others, they may experience ongoing difficulties. For some, mental health difficulties may arise months or even years after the birth of their baby.



Depression

From time to time we all feel sad, down, or lack enjoyment or interest in usual activities. However, if you feel like this for weeks at a time, there might be something else going on. This is particularly so if you experience significant changes to your behaviour, emotions, and physical functioning. The symptoms of depression can include:

- feeling overwhelmed, miserable, irritated or frustrated
- withdrawing from others such as friends or family
- difficulties concentrating or getting things done at work or home
- a lack of interest or avoidance of usual activities
- changes to sleeping, eating, feeling tired or run down

Anxiety

We feel anxious in response to something that is stressful, difficult, or dangerous, and the feeling usually decreases over time. It is normal for parents of babies born prematurely or unwell to worry about their baby's health and development. However, for some parents this worry is very strong and ongoing. Symptoms of anxiety to watch out for include:

- often worrying about the past or future
- feeling panic or afraid a lot of the time
- having difficulty concentrating
- avoiding situations, people, or experiences
- feeling an increase in heart rate or breathing rate
- feeling tense, restless, or fidgety and unable to sit still
- having an upset stomach



Post-traumatic stress

For some parents, their experiences around the birth and hospital admission can be traumatic. After an event such as this, some people may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress, such as:

- re-experiencing the event, such as through recurring memories or nightmares
- feeling tense, overly alert or having difficulties relaxing
- avoiding things that remind you of the event
- changes to thinking and mood such as feeling very numb or detached or feeling more reactive and tense

There are things you can do to support your mental health following the birth of your premature or unwell baby

Looking after your mental health is important

Feeling distressed for long periods of time and mental health difficulties can have a significant impact on a person's quality of life, functioning in daily life, and relationships with others.

Looking after yourself

It can be challenging to prioritise looking after yourself while your baby is in the neonatal unit. Doing your best to practice self-care and look after your eating and sleeping will support your mental health. Practicing mindfulness or relaxation techniques can also be helpful. When you're able to, incorporating other self-care activities into your routine such as keeping active and doing activities you enjoy will support your mental health beyond the neonatal unit. If you notice any changes to your physical health, it's important to speak to your family doctor.

Connecting with others

Try and make time to connect with the people who support and care for you. You may find it helpful to connect with other parents who have had a baby in the neonatal unit through a parent peer support group, either in person or online.



Asking for help

We all need help from time to time. It may be emotional support and practical help from family and friends. Sometimes we may need professional support as well, such as from a social worker, psychologist, nurse, lactation consultant, or family doctor.

Parents do not need to struggle through the experience alone

As well as self-care activities and asking for support from family and friends, asking for professional help and accessing support services can greatly support parents' mental health when needed.

Consider asking for professional support if you:

- want to talk with a professional about your mental health
- your feelings of anxiety or depression or stress are not improving
- your feelings of stress, worry, or sadness are getting stronger and lasting longer than before
- you're feeling like your mental health is having an impact on your daily functioning, your health, your relationships, or your enjoyment of life

In the hospital, additional help may be available from:

- social work services, pastoral care
- psychology, psychiatry and allied health clinicians
- lactation consultants
- parent support groups

Outside the hospital, additional help may be available through:

- your family doctor/general practitioner (GP), psychiatrist or paediatrician. Parents can ask for a mental health treatment plan and referral to a psychologist
- self-referral to a psychologist. To find a local psychologist, websites such as (<https://www.psychology.org.au/Find-a-Psychologist>) can be helpful
- online and telephone-based counselling services such as Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia - PANDA (1300 726 306) or Lifeline (13 11 14)