
Pregnancy Mental Health...

...and beyond. A guide to managing mental health during and after your pregnancy



PREGNANCY
MENTAL HEALTH
...AND BEYOND

by Delphi Ellis - Helping You Sparkle™

2017 Updated Edition

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Introduction

Pregnant, low and anxious? You're not alone.

When I found out I was expecting in 2003, it was a huge shock when my midwife, Zoe, told me she thought I had ante-natal depression; I was suffering with poor mental health in pregnancy.

It was a shock, because I would have described myself as a cheerful and positive person, delighted to be pregnant. But it was fair to say I was miserable at the same time. The words 'poor mental health' filled me with panic, because of what this might mean for my baby and me.

Thankfully, Zoe reassured me I wasn't alone. At the time, the research identified at least one in ten women experienced poor mental health in pregnancy. These days the figures are even higher.

The last thing you may expect when you're expecting is to feel depressed, anxious or stressed and those closest to you may find it hard to understand.

This is why, when you're feeling low, it's important to surround yourself with people who can support you. Your doctor and midwife are the obvious choice to support any health concerns you may have - physically or mentally; and nationally recognised healthcare guidelines are now in place to make sure they look after you.

Your family and friends can also play an important part in being there for you during your pregnancy and beyond. Encouraging them to keep comments helpful and ask you how they can help, can make all the difference. This updated guide, originally written just for pregnancy, is written with both you and them in mind, with links to other resources available at the back.

This guide must not replace any medical advice you will be receiving from your health care team. It is designed to help you consider positive ways to manage your mental health during and after your pregnancy. If you have any concerns about your mental health, please speak to your doctor or midwife as soon as possible.

Delphi Ellis

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Section 1

Early Warning Signs

Recognising symptoms

Everyone is different. One woman's experience of poor mental health will look different to another's. It's also important to say that a certain amount of stress or nervousness about pregnancy and what lies beyond is 'normal'. It's when these feelings stop you enjoying your pregnancy, or from living healthily once baby is born, that seeking help is important. Here are some of the more common symptoms:

- **Excessive crying** (more than 'normal' in pregnancy)
- **Tired** but unable to sleep
- **Wanting to sleep more** to 'escape'
- **No appetite** or over eating
- **Feeling isolated** and lonely
- **Withdrawing or feeling detached** from baby, friends and family
- **Irritability** and intrusive thoughts
- **Lack of interest** in things you'd normally enjoy
- **Repetitive, unhelpful thoughts** and behaviour

Your doctor and midwife are there to help you and, in the UK, there are healthcare guidelines which give them a number of options to discuss with you during and after your pregnancy.

Speak with close family and friends about how you feel and ask them to come to ante-natal or post-natal appointments with you, if that might help.

If you're reading this because you're worried about someone you care about, approach the subject sensitively. You could say you're worried about them, ask how they feel and what would help. If you feel you can't approach the subject with them, you could speak with your doctor about how to take the conversation forward. If you have immediate concerns, call 999.

Section 2

Causes

“Why do I feel like this?”

The causes of poor mental health are different for everyone, particularly during and after pregnancy. They can include:

- **Chemical or hormonal** changes due to the pregnancy
- **Persistent nausea** or having morning sickness
- **Physical changes** in the way your body looks (e.g. putting on weight, or swollen legs)
- **A fear of losing the baby**, especially if there is a history of miscarriage or still birth
- **Worrying about how you will cope** once the baby is born
- **Repetitive thoughts** about the pregnancy, a relationship, work or money
- **History of depression** or anxiety-related problems
- **Fear of the unknown** and what the future holds
- **Unplanned or unexpected** pregnancy

There may be no obvious reason, which makes seeking professional help an important part of your recovery. If you think you may be experiencing poor mental health, let your doctor or midwife know straight away.

Many women worry if they disclose poor mental health to a professional, there will be questions raised about their fitness to parent. But in fact talking about your concerns shows you're open to the help available and more likely to get the support you need early on. This can help you achieve a positive outcome for you and your family.

Section 3

Treatment

Options and Interventions for Managing Mental Health

Recommended treatment for poor mental health during and after pregnancy is changing all the time. If you experienced depression or anxiety before your pregnancy, your doctor may have already talked with you about medications you were taking at the time and whether it's safe to continue. If you've not taken medication before, your doctor may discuss this as an option, along with any known side effects.

There are also a number of drug-free interventions that are now being considered to help manage mental health, which are suitable in pregnancy and whilst breast feeding.

The National Institute for Clinical and Healthcare Excellence (NICE) recommends talking therapies like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), along with relaxation strategies such as mindfulness. Mindfulness is a form of drug-free 'medicine for modern times', which incorporates techniques like focusing on the breath as a means to help you relax. It can also help you manage unhelpful or intrusive thoughts, and be useful during labour.

Exercise, such as aqua-aerobics or yoga, and some complimentary therapies can also ease tension, anxiety and depression. Your midwife will be able to talk you through which of these are safe in pregnancy and beyond.

Whatever options are being considered, you should be involved in these discussions at all times. If you've noticed people are talking about you rather than with you, encourage them to include you in their conversations and ask you what would help.

Frequently Asked Questions

See also [Links of Interest](#)

“Will my mood affect my baby?”

Occasional mood swings are ‘normal’ in pregnancy and beyond; it’s when they affect our capacity to cope that we need to address them positively. Some sources report that poor maternal mental health can have an impact on foetal development - but research varies. How we behave during and after the pregnancy can affect the environment the baby is growing in. Everyone is different, so ask for help as soon as possible. Consider the healthy treatment options above and adopt a lifestyle which promotes positive mental health.

“It’s ruining my relationship, what should I do?”

For some people, a new baby brings with it natural worries about the future for *both* partners. Fear of change to lifestyle, work, money and relationships can all create conflict, especially if they haven’t been talked about. Have a conversation about how you feel and what’s on your mind. If it feels like problems aren’t going away, organisations like [Relate](#) can help. If your relationship has become violent or abusive since you discovered you were pregnant or baby was born, arrange to have a private word with your midwife or contact an organisation like [Refuge](#).

“If I have ante-natal depression, will I have post-natal depression?”

Some research suggests a link, especially if you had poor mental health before you were pregnant, but some women feel better almost as soon as the baby is born. Everyone is different so have a chat with your midwife or doctor if you’re worried.

“My doctor doesn’t understand, where can I get help?”

There are specific guidelines (CG192) in the UK to ensure you get the support you need from both your doctor and your midwife. If you’ve spoken to them but feel you’re not getting the help you need you can request to see someone else. You can also discuss your options when you attend hospital. Taking someone with you to your appointments can help you make your case, and organisations like [Powher](#) can act as advocates on your behalf.

Section 5

Top Tips

For pregnancy and beyond...

Write or Talk about it

Sometimes writing about how you feel can be really therapeutic. Keeping a journal can be a way of managing your thoughts in a way that feels safe for you. It's not for everyone, so if the process of writing makes you more anxious, make an appointment to see someone to talk through other options as soon as possible. Speaking with a friend or family member over a cup of tea, or talking with a healthcare professional, can be a healthy and reassuring way to offload.

Exercise and Relaxation

There are some limitations around what you can and can't do when you're pregnant, especially later on in pregnancy when some activities may become more difficult. Forms of meditation and mindfulness mentioned earlier, have been proven to be useful in pregnancy, labour and after the birth. You can also get some types of gym membership on prescription. Ask your doctor, midwife or health visitor about what's available locally.

Listen to music

Some research suggests that listening to music whilst you're pregnant can have a positive effect on your baby, which you can continue to play once the baby is born. Music is particularly useful if it helps *you* relax.

Focus on Sleep

There are now strong links between sleep and our mental health; the less we sleep the more this can impact our mood. As your pregnancy progresses and once baby is born, you may find it increasingly difficult to sleep well. Mindfulness can be a useful strategy for improving sleep, so see if there are any classes in your area or look at apps like Headspace. Opting for a healthy lifestyle can increase your chances of a better night's sleep, which includes slowly reducing your sugar and caffeine intake if possible.

Speak to your doctor or midwife before trying any of these suggestions, to talk through whether they're right for you.

Section 6

Links of Interest

The websites below may only be of interest; their services or content are not endorsed in any way. These links are accurate at the time of publication.

www.maternityaction.org.uk

Maternity Action is a UK charity committed to improving the health and well-being of pregnant women, partners and young children.

www.mind.org.uk

National charity fighting stigma around mental health. Contains a Post-Natal and Peri-Natal mental health booklet.

www.bacp.co.uk

British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy - Therapist Directory

www.ocdaction.org.uk

Help for those who recognise the symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder. Contains a perinatal OCD information leaflet.

www.relate.org.uk

Relationship counselling service

[Refuge](#)

Information about Pregnancy and Domestic Abuse

[Powher](#)

Mental Health Advocacy Service

[National Institute for Clinical and Healthcare Excellence](#)

Specific guidelines for the treatment of pregnancy mental health

[Samaritans](#)

[Pregnancy Mental Health](#) (Provider of this eGuide)

About the Author



Born and raised in Bedfordshire, England, Delphi is a qualified therapist and mental health and wellbeing trainer. She is a Women's Health and Mindfulness Practitioner, based in Milton Keynes. She specialises in teaching effective strategies for rest and relaxation, promoting healthy sleep, as seen on TV.

Her media appearances include ITV's This Morning and presenting the Guide to Sleep on Daybreak. She has featured in many popular publications including Spirit & Destiny magazine, Natural Health and The Guardian.

In 2004, Delphi set up a unique website for people affected by ante-natal depression (depressing during pregnancy). In 2007, she won the Spiritual Connexions Award for Best Service to Others and in 2008 was regional finalist for the Health and Social Care Awards for Mental Health and Wellbeing. She also works with a local charity supporting cancer patients, which received the Queens Award for Voluntary Service in 2014.

Websites:

www.pregnancymentalhealth.net

www.helpingyousparkle.com

www.facebook.com/helpingyousparkle

www.twitter.com/helpingyousparkle

Kindfully - Mindfulness for Busy People

www.kindfully.co.uk

Important Information

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