

# POSTNATAL DEPRESSION

*Getting the support you need*



**Mental Health Foundation**  
*mauri tū, mauri ora* OF NEW ZEALAND

## **The adjustment to parenthood**

Bringing a new pēpi/baby home can be a joyful experience, but it is a big adjustment for the whole whānau. It is normal for both parents to feel anxious and tired at first, but as you get used to the changes that come with having a pēpi, you might find that you and your whānau begin to feel more settled.

Women\* are more likely to experience mental health challenges, like depression and anxiety, after having a pēpi, then at any other time in their lives. If you're not feeling like yourself or are having a hard time coping a few weeks after delivering your pēpi, it is important to get some support.

This pamphlet includes information about the mental health conditions you might experience after giving birth, and how to get help when you need it.

**Remember: Depression and anxiety can be treated, and are not your fault.**

## **Baby blues**

3 in 4 people will experience the baby blues in the week after giving birth. The 'blues' can last for a few days, and it is normal to feel sad or tearful. If these feelings persist or get worse over time, it can be a sign of postnatal depression. Talk to your whānau or lead maternity carer (LMC) about how you're feeling, and seek support if you need it.

**If you feel something is not quite right, there is support available. See the back page for support options and self care tips.**



## **Postnatal depression (PND)**

Postnatal depression affects up to 20% of mothers\* and there is no specific cause. Let your LMC know if you have experienced or are living with depression or bipolar disorder, as these conditions can increase the risk of PND.

While most new parents will experience some or all of these symptoms in the first few weeks and months, what distinguishes PND is the severity and duration of these feelings.

Partners and other whānau might also experience depression after a pēpi is born. Depression can also occur during pregnancy (prenatal depression).

### **Common signs and symptoms of PND include feeling:**

- numb and empty
- tired or unable to sleep
- pōuri/sad and tearful
- pukuriri/angry and hōhā/irritable
- guilty or resentful
- no enjoyment in things that typically make you happy
- lonely, and distant from others
- useless, not good enough, or like you can't manage
- anxious about the wellbeing of your pēpi, fearful about being alone with them, or disconnected from them.

### **You might also be:**

- checking on your pēpi constantly and needing to be reassured
- focused on managing baby issues, like colic, reflux, feeding, or sleep, while overlooking your own feelings
- having thoughts of hurting yourself or your pēpi. This is a sign you need urgent help. Talk to a health professional or call a helpline (see back page).

**Remember:** Experiencing depression doesn't mean you're a bad parent or that you don't love your baby. It just means you need some extra support. Talk to your midwife or doctor as soon as you can.

## **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

Up to six percent of women\* will develop an intense stress reaction after a birth experience that felt traumatic or difficult. This can lead to feelings of helplessness, anxiety and fearfulness. PTSD is very personal and subjective to the person's own experience, but factors that can contribute include how safe, consulted and cared for a person felt during their birth experience.

### **Common signs and symptoms of PTSD include feeling:**

- upset and distressed when you think about the labour or delivery
- afraid or unable to go to sleep, or having nightmares about your experience
- very sensitive to what is happening around you, and on guard all the time
- more irritable and less tolerant of people than usual
- flat and disconnected from others.

You might also be experiencing flashbacks, memory gaps, or avoiding reminders of the labour and birth.

## **Perinatal anxiety**

Some new parents experience perinatal anxiety where they feel constantly worried, scared and on edge. While it is normal to worry about many things with a new pēpi, if these thoughts and feelings are constant and difficult to get under control, it's important to reach out for support. Talk to your whānau and LMC.

## **Postpartum psychosis (PP)**

This is a rare but serious condition affecting less than two per 1,000 women\*. Symptoms can include very high or low mood and psychosis (being out of touch with reality, unusual thoughts or behaviours, or seeing or hearing things that others cannot). Postpartum psychosis occurs suddenly, usually within two to four weeks of giving birth. Early referral to mental health services at your local hospital is very important. Talk to your LMC or a health professional if you think you might be experiencing postpartum psychosis.



## Finding support

Help is available for you. All these conditions are treatable and manageable with the right support. Find the solutions that work best for you, and if one option isn't working, try another. Often people find a combination of tools and strategies work best for them.

- **Talk to whānau** about how you're feeling, and ask for (and accept) help with practical things like childcare or household tasks.
- **Talk to a health professional** such as a GP or Māori health provider, midwife, LMC or Well Child nurse. They may refer you for specialist help (e.g. to a psychologist or counsellor).
- **Your doctor may prescribe medication** and provide other strategies for managing your wellbeing. Talk to them about what is right for you. There are medications that can be taken when you are breastfeeding or chestfeeding as well. It is important that you don't suddenly stop taking medication without your doctor's advice.
- **Talking therapy** or counselling can be very helpful. It provides a supportive, non-judgemental space for you (and your whānau) to understand your experience, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. You will learn skills and strategies to help you manage emotions and adjust to becoming a parent. There are therapists who can provide support in line with your cultural beliefs and practices.
- **Consider rongoā** or other traditional medicines.
- **Peer support** can connect you with others who have similar experiences. Find support group listings here: [mentalhealth.org.nz/groups](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/groups)

**Remember: While it can feel difficult to take this first step, research shows that acting immediately is beneficial.**

*\*A note on the statistics used in this document:  
PND, PPD, perinatal anxiety and mental health challenges affect people of every gender.  
Unfortunately, sometimes there is a lack of specific statistics allowing us to be inclusive of gender diversity when using statistics in this pamphlet.*

This resource was produced with input from many people. Special thanks go to PADA ([www.pada.nz](http://www.pada.nz)), Kirsten Wooff ([www.resiliencepsychology.co.nz](http://www.resiliencepsychology.co.nz)) and the midwifery team at Waitematā DHB.

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## Self-care

Right now you might be focused on caring for your pēpi, but looking after your own wellbeing is important too. There are small actions you can take to boost your wellbeing during this time. Moving your body, eating well, doing the things you enjoy, connecting with others, and getting plenty of rest will help you to feel your best.

## For whānau, friends and partners

It can be hard to know how to help someone having these experiences. Helping the new whānau rest and giving practical help (childcare, meals, household tasks) can make a difference, especially for solo parents and those with pēpi who were or are in NICU, or who have been unwell.

Encourage them to share how they are feeling, and listen. See [mentalhealth.org.nz/help/supporting-others](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/help/supporting-others) for more guidance.

Here are some things you could say to show your support:

*"You are not alone in this. I'm here for you."*

*"You're finding it hard, that makes sense. It's the hardest job in the world! Know that the way you're feeling will change."*

*"People don't talk enough about how hard it is and how common these experiences really are."*

## Free helplines

Talking with a trained professional can help:

- Call or text **1737** to speak to a trained counsellor
- Call Plunketline **0800 933 922**
- Call Depression Helpline **0800 111 757**
- More helplines at: [mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines)

## Further information

Find up-to-date information at these trusted websites:

**Plunket:** [www.plunket.org.nz](https://www.plunket.org.nz)

**PADA** (Perinatal Anxiety & Depression): [www.pada.nz](https://www.pada.nz)

**Healthify:** [www.healthify.nz](https://www.healthify.nz)

## We need your help

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