

Recovery from Perinatal Anxiety & Depression

If you are experiencing perinatal (during pregnancy or after birth) anxiety or depression you may have many questions:

- Why is this happening to me?
- Who can help me through this?
- What would be the best sort of treatment or support for me?
- Will I get better and how long will it take?
- What if I want to have another baby in the future?

A range of physical, psychological and external factors can contribute to the development of perinatal anxiety and depression. Recovery depends on addressing all of these factors and often accessing professional help and support. Help is available and getting the right support early leads to a faster recovery.

Who can Help?

Asking for help is the first and most difficult step. It is important to know that there are many informed and compassionate health professionals who are experienced in helping parents overcome perinatal anxiety and depression. An understanding health professional can be a great ally throughout your recovery process. You could talk to anyone of these: General Practitioner (GP); obstetrician; midwife; Child Health Nurse; PANDA; psychologist; psychiatrist; social worker; counsellor or other trusted health professional.

The discussion you have may cover:

- How long you have been feeling anxious or depressed
- How distressing your thoughts and feelings are
- Whether your thoughts and feelings are affecting your daily life i.e., sleep disturbance; change in appetite; or inability to function as you normally would
- Any scary thoughts or feelings that are difficult to share like thoughts of harming yourself or your baby/children.

If you feel that you are not heard, or that the concerns you raise are not taken seriously, seek an alternative opinion.

PANDA is a good place to start if you are unsure who to approach. The PANDA Helpline staff will listen and help you identify ways to obtain support and treatment if needed.

Treatment Options

Recovery from perinatal anxiety or depression can involve more than one kind of approach.

Medication

Sometimes medication is recommended. It is important to know that there are medications that can be safely used in pregnancy or during breastfeeding¹. Before prescribing medication, however, your doctor should discuss with you:

- How long you have been feeling this way
- The severity of your symptoms
- The safety of the medication
- How long you might need to take it
- Why they are recommending this treatment and how they expect it to help
- If there are any side effects and whether these can be reduced
- If there are effective alternatives to medication.

¹Patkar A, et. al. Pharmacotherapy of Depression in Pregnancy. *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry*. 2004; 16:87–100.

Be gentle
with yourself.

If you feel that you are not getting the support and understanding you need from your doctor when discussing whether to take medication, get a second opinion.

Counselling

Counselling can be useful if you are ready to speak about your challenges and vulnerabilities with a trained professional. In counselling, feelings and beliefs can be explored and supported which can help you feel cared for and understood. You can also learn strategies to help manage distress during these difficult times:

- Your GP can make a referral and work closely with other health professionals, such as a psychologist or a psychiatrist, who may be providing care
- The PANDA Helpline is free and confidential and can put you in touch with counsellors experienced in providing support to people during pregnancy or after birth.

General Strategies for Recovery

Caring for a baby can be an isolating and exhausting experience, particularly if you are the primary caregiver. Anxiety and depression can heighten these feelings. The following strategies may help:

- Seek company when you're feeling low (even though this might be the last thing you want to do, being alone can make everything seem bigger and less manageable)
- Share your experience with other parents who have experienced or are experiencing anxiety or depression
- Join a supported playgroup or support group
- Call PANDA to talk about your thoughts and feelings and explore options for support
- Talk to a trusted family member or friend
- Prioritise rest. Talk to your Child Health Nurse about support available in the community or ask family members or friends for practical support
- Look after your own health by eating well and getting some gentle exercise (walking is a great starting point!)
- Limit alcohol and other drugs that can work against your wellbeing
- Be gentle with yourself. Recovery can take time. It is a journey that often involves taking a few steps forward and then a step back.

Planning for Your Future

Having another baby

If you've experienced a mental health concern during pregnancy or after childbirth you may be thinking about whether or not you will have any more children. These are difficult questions, and ones that you will most probably want to discuss with your family, as well as a medical practitioner who knows your history and circumstances.

Chance of recurrence: the statistics

Your chance of experiencing depression with future births is thought to be up to 40%. However, with understanding of your experience, including knowing when to get help and having a strong support network, the risk or severity can be reduced. If you have experienced very severe depression, or postnatal psychosis, it is particularly important to get advice from a doctor and consider all your options before becoming pregnant again.

It can be difficult to decide whether or not to have another baby. Ultimately, this is something that only you can decide.

Things you can do:

- Give yourself time to recover emotionally after your baby is born. It can be difficult to notice when the time is right. A good indicator might be when you are enjoying parenthood and feeling engaged with your baby.
- Talk about having another baby with the important people in your life. While the decision is yours, you are likely to need their support.
- Talk to your GP or mental health professional about what you should consider when planning to have another baby. Have a good network of health care professionals to support you.
- Know the symptoms of anxiety and depression. Have some agreed 'signs' for when it's time to seek help (these might be things like changes in sleep or increased irritability).

With planning and support, knowing the signs and symptoms and using strategies developed in your previous recovery period, you will be better prepared to take action early and deal with any recurrence.

