

#### Encourage to woman her to talk about her feelings (continued):

4. **Listen to her.** Keep trying to listen to her worries without interruptions, ideas, or advice. It can be tempting to try to give her advice and tell her what you think she should do. Try to let her know that you are listening.
5. **Empower her to make decisions for herself, as you encourage her to seek help.** Being heard enables a woman to clarify her issues for herself, which is the first step in her determining what to do to address them. Sometime she will benefit from knowing her options and other times she will need you to be more involved in decision making.
6. **Express the expectation of her recovery.** Help her to expect to recover by expecting that she will come through this (with help). It's generally hard for her to believe that she will ever feel well again. You can hold the light of hope for her, by telling her she will recover which, in turn, can support her to make the huge effort to recover.

Sometimes you may feel like you cannot do anything right and you have to wait for your partner to open up about her need for support. If you are concerned about her wellbeing or that of your baby or older children you will need to take action and get some help, even if you risk getting into trouble. The Helpline workers at PANDA can talk with you about how you are feeling and support you through this difficult time with information and referrals.



# Fact Sheet<sup>8</sup>

## HOW TO HELP THE MOTHER WHO IS NOT ACKNOWLEDGING POSTNATAL DEPRESSION

Our society makes it difficult for a woman to acknowledge that she may be dealing with postnatal depression, as its usual message is about the joy and bliss of motherhood. These messages rarely address the reality of the challenges motherhood brings to the life of each woman and her partner. The media often reinforces society's unrealistic expectations of motherhood, for example they portray celebrities who appear to be coping exceptionally well with becoming mothers. Postnatal depression is often portrayed very negatively and sensationally in the media. A woman who is not coping can feel very alone and different from everyone else who seems to be coping.



#### Some reasons why a woman may not acknowledge postnatal depression:

- Many women and their partners do not know what *postnatal depression* is, or how to recognise its signs.
- The stigma associated with depression prevents women asking for help. Her need to be seen as normal and a good mother is very strong. Symptoms can be masked with incredible effort, sometimes even from her partner.
- It is hard for a woman with postnatal depression to admit she is not coping and to ask for help. This involves acknowledging that she cannot manage her feelings and that something is seriously wrong. Denial is the enemy of recovery.
- Depression itself breaks down a woman's ability to communicate, make decisions and help herself.
- It can be too difficult to find the words to talk about her painful and negative thoughts because she may feel that no one will understand, or others will be horrified by her thoughts.
- In the early weeks after having a baby there are many other things happening which a woman may use to explain how she feels (e.g. baby's sleep, her sleep changes, impact on her partner). She assumes things will get better when everything settles down.
- She may have tried to communicate her feelings or to ask for help from family or services and her feelings were dismissed or not responded to. This leads to an increased sense of failure, inadequacy and guilt, especially if she's told that she should be happy or that her own mother did it tough and she was OK. She may not try again to access help until her depression reduces her capacity to perform everyday tasks.
- A woman might blame her partner for how she feels, resulting in significant conflict between the new parents.



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### Some reasons why a woman may not acknowledge postnatal depression (continued):

- The woman does not trust health or family services workers with her 'dark' secrets. She may deliberately put on a sunny, capable face when seeing her nurse or doctor because she desperately doesn't want them to know the extent of her bad feelings.
- Fear that she will be put on antidepressants if she talks about her feelings and what medication might mean if she is pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Fear that the authorities will take her baby away if she has PND and is not coping, that they will mark her as a bad mother. This fear is reinforced if there is a conflictual partnership breakdown and she fears her ex-partner will take the baby from her.
- Even the most skilled health professional can miss PND, especially if the woman is not giving clear or honest indications of how she is.
- Not knowing what services are available to help her or she feels that no one can help her anyway.

### Partners, family and friends

Sometimes a woman's partner, family or friends are the first to pick up that things have changed for her or that she is not coping with motherhood. It can be very difficult to observe these changes and know how to address them, especially if she is not prepared to talk about your concerns or agree to get help.

When a new mother feels things are not right, it is ideal for her to talk to her partner, family, friends and health carers to get it checked out. Some women go to great lengths to avoid discussing and dealing with their mental health issues. Over time these mothers can become quite unwell, and their partner, family and friends can become increasingly concerned. She may become angry and defensive if they bring up their concerns, stubbornly refuse to get help or stay involved with health services.

If this continues over time, the costs for the woman's partner, family and friends increase. Her partner may need to take more time off work to help with the baby and provide support. There may be growing concerns for the wellbeing and safety of her, the baby and older children.

She may be blaming her partner, family or friends for everything. Ultimately she may break ties with her family and friends or tell her partner to leave the relationship. She may be saying that he is the source of her distress and if it wasn't for him she wouldn't be feeling the way she is, if he leaves she will get better.

Partners in this situation become very distressed as they know their partner is unwell but she is not accepting any help and they are unable to do anything to prevent their family breaking down completely. They are at risk of developing depression and anxiety themselves, losing confidence in themselves and their assessment of the situation. The breakdown of the couple relationship and the new family is one of the greatest tragedies of unacknowledged and untreated postnatal depression.

The following is a list of strategies the partner, family and friends can try to support and get help for a woman with PND, as well as to take care of themselves.

- Find out as much as you can about postnatal depression. This will help you to identify the impact of the illness on your partner's emotions, behaviour and decisions. Try to keep this separate from what you know about your partner before she became depressed.
- Get support for yourself. Talk to someone about how you feel and take care of yourself with rest, exercise and time away from caring for your family member. Contact PANDA for support and information.

### Partners, family and friends (continued):

- Try to avoid making any significant decisions during this time as you both may not be thinking clearly. Remember that it is likely that the postnatal depression is contributing to her unhappiness in the relationship and that if she does seek help and recover, much of the conflict is likely to settle.
- Try to be patient with her. She is not her normal self or thinking clearly. You may have to listen to her concerns and provide support, even though she is not listening to your concerns or getting help. This is very difficult and frustrating so sharing this with your family and friends is important.
- Trust your instincts and your concern for her – you may need to risk getting into trouble with her in the short term by getting help for her, especially if you are very concerned about her and the baby. You can contact her doctor, maternal and child health nurse to let them know of your concerns and seek their advice. Contact crisis mental health services or go to the local hospital emergency department if you need to.
- For women who refuse to get help and struggle to care for their baby and older children or if children are exposed to her unstable mental health, drugs or alcohol, child protection may need to be involved. The wellbeing of the baby and older children is very important. In this situation child protection would work to ensure that the woman accesses services so that she can recover and the family stay together.

### How to encourage her to talk about her feelings:

1. **Acknowledge and normalise the difficulty of the situation.** Make it OK for her to talk about her difficult feelings by identifying the challenges of motherhood for women in general and the challenges specific to her situation.  
"Adjusting to being a mother is one of the largest transitions women ever make, yet we often don't speak about how difficult it can be."
2. **Validate and support.** You may feel that she is not listening to your attempts to support her. Validate her feelings as real to her no matter how bad or unreasonable they sound. Try to avoid telling her how she should feel. Be positive about even the little things she is doing well.  
"You are dealing with a lot, (e.g. the lack of sleep, having little support, being away from your family) anyone in your situation would find it tough."  
"You are doing a really good job"
3. **Encourage her to talk about her feelings.** She may be feeling and thinking many different things as she recovers from the birth and manages lack of sleep and the anxieties of motherhood. Ask her open questions that encourage her to give more than yes or no answers.  
"I wouldn't be surprised if you were feeling that way"  
"I'm wondering if this might be how you are feeling"  
"How are you finding motherhood?"  
"How are you really feeling?"