

Caring for Someone with Perinatal Anxiety & Depression

Up to 1 in 10 women and 1 in 20 men struggle with antenatal depression and more than 1 in 7 new mums¹ and up to 1 in 10 new dads² experience postnatal depression each year in Australia. Anxiety is just as common and many parents experience anxiety and depression at the same time. Caring for someone with perinatal (during pregnancy or after birth) depression or anxiety can be confusing, stressful and demanding. This FACTSHEET is to help you look after yourself and those close to you.

Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

The signs and symptoms can vary and may include:

- Panic attacks (racing heart, palpitations, shortness of breath, shaking or feeling physically 'detached' from your surroundings)
- Persistent, generalised worry, often focused on fears for the health or wellbeing of baby
- The development of obsessive or compulsive behaviours
- Changes in appetite: under or overeating
- Sleep problems unrelated to the baby's needs
- Extreme lethargy: feeling physically or emotionally overwhelmed and unable to cope with the demands of chores and looking after baby
- Memory problems or loss of concentration ('brain fog')
- Loss of confidence and lowered self esteem
- Constant sadness or crying
- Withdrawal from friends and family

- Fear of being alone with baby
- Irritability and/or anger
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Loss of interest in sex or previously enjoyed activities
- Intrusive thoughts of harm to self or baby, thoughts of death or suicide.

What's it Like for Carers?

Caring for someone struggling with perinatal anxiety or depression can be distressing and confronting.

You might feel:

- Confused or uncertain about what to say or do to help: **"I don't know what to say in case I make things worse"**
- Useless: **"Nothing I say or do seems to help!"**
- Frustrated and angry: **"Why are they being like this when I am trying so hard?"**
- Overwhelmed: **"It's all too much!"**
- Alienated: **"I don't know how to relate to this experience"**
- Unsure about how or when to help: **"Am I interfering? Should I be helping more? Should I be letting them have space?"**
- A sense of loss: **"When is the person going to 'be their old self'?"**
- A loss of support: **"The person I used to closely rely on is no longer there for me"**

Looking after yourself and your own health is really important.

¹ Deloitte Access Economics. The cost of perinatal depression in Australia. Report. Post and Antenatal Depression Association 2012.

² Paulson, J. F. & Bazemore, S. D. (2010). Prenatal and postpartum depression in fathers and its association with maternal depression: A meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 303(19), 1961-1969. (doi:10.1001/jama.2010.605)

Focus on providing practical help and gentle emotional support.

Tips for carers:

- Anxiety and depression are genuine illnesses. Try not to take any out of character behaviour personally
- Focus on providing practical help and gentle emotional support. Be guided by the person you are supporting as to how much, and what sort of help, they need
- Remember that you are the support person, but not the health professional. You don't need to take responsibility for providing medical advice or making treatment decisions. Make sure that the person you're caring for has a good medical team around them
- It can help people with anxiety or depression to have someone they trust with them at medical appointments. Ask if they want or need this kind of help or someone to discuss treatment options with. Try not to be judgmental about their decisions, particularly those around medication.

Specific Challenges for Partners

You may notice:

- Changes in the mood and personality of 'the person you thought you knew'
- Loss of emotional intimacy: your partner might withdraw or push you away
- Changes in your sex life: anxious or depressed people commonly lose interest in or lack the energy for sex
- Increased/extreme neediness. This can be frustrating for a partner who already feels pressure from work, an impending birth or new baby
- Increased physical stress from being the main carer (cooking, cleaning, loss of sleep, working and looking after a new baby).

Tips for partners:

- The best thing you can provide for your partner at this time is emotional support. Try to be gentle and encouraging.
- Remember that the symptoms your partner is experiencing are due to illness rather than faults in your relationship.
- Now is not the best time to make big life decisions about things like your relationship, career or your house.
- Reassure your partner that you understand any loss of interest in sex for the time being. It can be very frustrating when a depressed partner loses their libido, but this is a sign of the illness. There may be other ways of expressing intimacy.
- Looking after yourself and your own health is really important and will help you be the best support for your partner.
- Accept offers of help from family or friends.

Getting Help and Support

- If you are worried about your partner, family member or friend, encourage them to phone the PANDA Helpline or talk with their GP, midwife, obstetrician or child health nurse.
- Partners and carers can also call the PANDA Helpline. Having support in your role as a carer is important.
- If you are worried about the safety of someone close to you please do not leave them alone. Stay with them and seek medical help via a GP, mental health team or local hospital. You can phone 000 if you are concerned about their immediate safety.

