



Supporting postnatal mental health and defending maternal rights

Publication of Tafara Wellness Initiative.

The significance of maternal mental health

With all of the responsibilities of parenthood, there is a tendency for mothers to push aside their mental health.

Ignoring your mental health throughout the postnatal period may affect your wellbeing and that of your newborn and family.

Entering into motherhood is a significant transition that brings forth feelings of pleasure and satisfaction combined with the struggles and stress of your newborn's needs.

Having ambivalence (mixed feelings) after childbirth is a normal reaction to the profound changes that come about with this newfound role.

However, disregarding your thoughts and feelings could cause serious mental health conditions. Paying attention to your mental wellbeing is just as fundamental as paying attention to your physical needs.

A mother's mental health may have lasting effects on her child's emotional, social and cognitive development. If you are struggling with mental illness, your ability to provide responsive caregiving may lessen.

Mood disorders often affect your energy levels and concentration, slowing down how you react to your child's cues. These disruptions could prevent the formation of a secure mother-child attachment and curb your child's emotion regulation.



Having ambivalent feelings does not define you as any less of a mother.

What are the hurdles to accessing support and services?

1: Pressure from society

The societal expectation for mothers to be strong-willed, altruistic, and tolerant creates a considerable emotional load, often suppressing their willingness to speak of their troubles.

Women may choose to keep silent out of fear of the adverse perceptions surrounding mental illness within the community. Those who do speak out might face harsh insults, backbiting and abandonment.

The absence of a support system can worsen a mother's mental wellbeing, bringing forth feelings of humiliation and distress. Her beliefs about herself may slump, causing her to question her competence as a mother.

2: Lack of education

Numerous countries and communities do not provide sufficient education on mental wellbeing and early identification of conditions.

Mothers might be given detailed information on the needs of their newborn and the responsibility of caregiving, without any support on how to manage emotional dysregulation or recognise mental health conditions in themselves.

Healthcare providers often fail to inform mothers on the extensive amount of support and services that are available to them.

Lacking this information, mothers are left by themselves to navigate their emotional wellbeing, unknowing of the resources and treatment intended to support them.

QUESTION ...

What mental health services are available in your local area?

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3: Having no free time

Responsive caregiving is an all-consuming responsibility that leaves almost no time or energy for mothers to attend to their own needs. The demands of breastfeeding, changing nappies, bathing and soothing your child may push aside the mother's mental wellbeing.

Hence, you might have a persistent feeling of remorse for doing anything other than caregiving. The absence of having a support system willing to provide caregiving and housework assistance can have adverse effects on the mother and newborn if she cannot access the support and services she needs.

Giving precedence to your mental health as a new or expectant mother

Practice observing your thoughts, feelings and behaviours.



happiness



disgust



sadness



fear



anger



surprise

It might feel tempting to dismiss your emotions. However, emotions do not tend to respond well to being either ignored or kept aback. Very often, we find that our attempts to manage them in this way intensify them and make things worse.

With an accumulation of unfelt feelings, we may feel the need to involve ourselves in risky behaviours as a way of distraction from any difficult emotions hidden within us. These behaviours might include drug use, alcohol consumption and smoking, all of which provide a temporary relief at a heavy cost.

We must give ourselves permission to feel. It is a fundamental right – an inherent part of our humanity. Emotions are not bound by notions of right and wrong; each and every one exists as a signal, weaving us through the tapestry of life.

We must do ourselves the favour of taking the time to acquaint ourselves with our actual emotions. We must continually ask ourselves a straightforward but profound question:

[What am I feeling?]

Naming your emotions is the gateway to effectively managing and responding to emotional experiences. This practice can cultivate an awareness of the origins of feelings, revealing the correlation between your emotions and what you think and do.

There are physical symptoms you can look out for that might indicate your mental health is worsening. Among new mothers, the most predominant mental health problem is postpartum depression. Pay attention to the following symptoms:



Keep a journal of your thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms. Show this to your healthcare provider at appointments.

- ☐ a persistent feeling of sadness or low mood
- ☐ loss of pleasure in activities you used to find interest in
- ☐ fatigue and low energy
- ☐ trouble falling asleep
- ☐ problems with concentration and decision-making
- ☐ thoughts of hurting oneself or your newborn
- ☐ suicidal ideation

→ If you think you might be depressed, speak to your primary healthcare provider as soon as possible.

Use emotion regulation techniques.

Picture this.

You are suddenly awoken in the middle of the night to the sounds of your newborn baby. You have hardly slept for the past three days. Your heart pounds, your stomach lurches and your head spins.

When faced with unexpected or challenging situations, it's tempting to react impulsively. We might indulge in immediate impulses to make ourselves feel better, whilst simultaneously making the situation worse.

What if you could substitute that automatic reaction for a more intentional response?

That is exactly what the STOPP technique attempts to do. It provides a structured approach for individuals to create distance between their distressing thoughts and feelings and reduce the physical symptoms of high stress. This helps us to respond more rationally.

1 STOP!

Pause for a second.

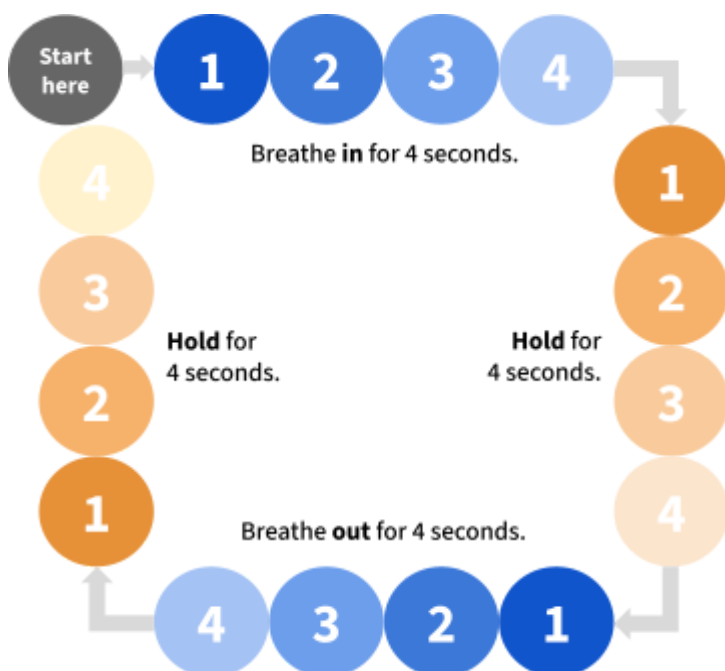
If you find yourself in a distressing situation, bring yourself to an abrupt stop. Hold off on your immediate reaction.



2 Take a breath.

Bring your full attention to your breathing. Direct your attention to the air entering through your nostrils, travelling down to your lungs, and causing your tummy to gently rise. Feel the air escape through pursed lips, releasing the tension your body is holding onto. Lean into the way your body falls and rises with each breath, and as you do, imagine each inhale bringing you a sense of serenity, whilst each exhale carries away any stress or distractions.

You may want to try specific breathing techniques that lower your heart rate and reduce your fight or flight response. The square breathing technique involves breathing in for a count of four, holding your breath for a count of four, and breathing out for a count of four. The technique is then repeated following a pause of four counts.



3 Observe.

Observe your body, your thoughts, and your emotions without reacting.

Try not to resist any of your thoughts, feelings or physical sensations. Give them time to unfold and pass by.

Scan your whole body, paying attention to any physical sensations that are there.

Which parts of your body are holding tension?

Turn your attention to the thoughts going through your head – acknowledging each one.

Are they lingering or fleeting? You may find that you can identify the emotions you're feeling. If so, name them.

4 Pull back and Perspective.

Approach the situation with an alternate perspective. Imagine taking steps away, creating distance between yourself and the situation, as if you were an outsider. Is there another way you could think or feel about this? Will this matter in a day, a week, a month? How would you advise a friend that was in this exact situation?

We often assume that our thoughts are grounded in the truth. However, sometimes

our thoughts are irrational, causing us to jump to conclusions or seeing only the worst about situations. These are known as cognitive distortions, and we should practise questioning these thoughts.

5 Practise what works and Proceed.

Move forward by thinking about how you would like to respond to the situation. What is practical to do in this situation? What would benefit me and my baby the most? Having used this technique, you can select a reasonable approach to take rather than reacting on impulse.

Practise this technique throughout your day. The more you do it, the more effective it will be!

Harness a support system.

Having a support system is an important protective factor for dealing with the difficulties of parenthood. Individuals with high levels of social support appear to be more resilient in the face of stressful situations.

There are ways to seek out such support and nurture your support networks.

Strengthen ties with your loved ones.

- Talking to a supportive friend or family member can heighten your mood, improve your outlook and preserve your mental wellbeing.
- Your loved ones can uplift your self-esteem and give you a sense of autonomy through validating your emotions and supporting you with problem-solving. Validation is the backbone of emotional support and establishes a rapport where you feel seen and heard.
- Your loved ones may provide you with alternate perspectives that heighten your self-assurance and give you a greater feeling of control.
- Being surrounded by people that see you as being capable can uphold your motivation and support you in addressing your problems.

Maintain satisfaction in your marriage.

If you have a spouse, putting in effort to maintain your marriage following childbirth is central to relieving stress and supporting your child's development. You must be honest with one another about your feelings and your troubles.

Listed below are a few methods that could help you to navigate parenthood with your partner:

1. Discuss your approach to parenting.

You may find that your views do not align with your partner on how you want to bring up your children. Try to find a common ground without attacking your partner's ideas. Approach the conversation with a genuine desire to listen to them and grasp their thoughts.

2. Divide housework and childcare fairly.

Mothers often feel dissatisfaction if they are performing almost all of the housework and childcare. Having a one-sided division of labour can cause mothers to feel exhausted and resent their partner.

You could address this problem by writing out a list of all household tasks and dividing them fairly between the two of you. Doing this can make partners feel a greater sense of fairness and gratitude towards the other person. The tasks do not have to be divided 50/50 though, particularly if one partner works more hours than the other.