



Supporting mental health for new parents

“You have a lovely new baby; you should be smiling!”

The arrival of a baby - whether the first child or another addition to a growing family - is a time to be celebrated and enjoyed. However, it is also one of the most turbulent times for a young family, with many new parents experiencing mental ill health. Approximately 68% of women and 57% of men with mental health problems are parents. (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2016)

It takes a village/community to raise a child.

The Balinese community have a custom when a new baby is welcomed into a family - The baby must not touch the earth/ground for the first 3 months. This is because the new born is considered sacred and pure and any contact with the floor may defile it. The baby is held for the first 3 months, never put down; but this is not solely the responsibility of its parents, the whole village take it in turns to hold the baby, day and night. Someone from the family or the wider village is always holding the child. After 3 months the baby is put down onto the earth as part of a welcoming ceremony. It is a reminder of the commitment needed by the whole village to support the family and to raise the child. However, perhaps this is also a reminder of the practical help that can be given to the parents of a new born. Whilst the village are holding their child the parents can rest, do tasks, spend time with their other children, the village are literally sharing the load.

What can the church do to support new parents and parents of a new baby?

Put the support in place before the baby is born

Jesus often asked people what they wanted, how he can help. This is a good place to start, your church might have things that automatically happen when a family welcome a child e.g.

- Providing a hot meal each day for the first few weeks
- Practical help with ironing, washing, housework
- Spending time with older siblings to enable parents to be with baby
- Prayer support

But, there might be something else that the family really need, we need to make time to ask and ask often as time moves on. Its good to have agreed a support package before the baby is born but to review the needs after the baby has arrived.

Watch out for the signs and take action

There are changes that are to be expected in new parents, changes in mood, tiredness, decreased motivation to do anything that's not about the baby and so on. We need to be aware of what changes are taking place in the parents and if we are concerned then ask, is everything Ok? If you feel the parent may be suffering with post-natal depression then encourage them to seek professional help from their doctor, health visitor or midwife.



WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP PROMOTE GOOD MENTAL HEALTH?

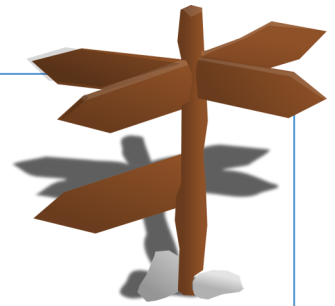
- * Offer (but don't force) practical help and support—could your church organise a rota of people to deliver meals for the family for the first few weeks? If older children need walking to school while the family adjusts to new routines, do you have responsible people in your congregation who are DBS checked and could offer to help out? Do mum and baby need a lift to appointments? Can someone with baby experience and a DBS certificate offer to sit with the children while parents catch up on some rest? Remember safeguarding principles in all of this—check GP5 if unsure.
- * Give encouragement—maybe a card or letter from members of your congregation or a pastoral team, the occasional text message or WhatsApp. Make sure people know you're thinking of them and praying for their family and that you are there for them. Let them know they're doing a good job. If you've been in the situation of being a new parent yourself, maybe share some of what you felt at the time.
- * Drop a surprise goodie bag round—a parcel with things like nice coffee or tea, chocolate, soaps, relaxing music etc. Remember things for all of the family, especially the father.
- * Finances may be tight as the new parents readjust—can you deliver a gift card anonymously?
- * Make sure you focus on the new parents as much as on the baby, even more. Don't assume everything is going swimmingly or that they must be really happy—give them opportunities to tell you how they are really feeling by asking open questions.
- * Some parents may appreciate you offering to hold the baby, for some it may make them very uncomfortable or anxious. Do not presume.
- * Listen. Listen, listen, listen.
- * Give opportunities for new parents to support each other. This may involve linking them up with a family a little further down the line—maybe with a 9 month old—who can swap stories, or providing opportunity for a group of new parents to come together. Set up a Bumps and Babies group for mums and/or dads. Give them a space to talk to others in similar situations. See the January fact sheet for more. For Dads, a “Who Let The Dads Out” group may be helpful. See the June fact sheet for more on this.



PLEASE REMEMBER: You are not there to replace mental health professionals. Always encourage those who are showing signs of depression to seek medical advice from those who are qualified to give it. The next page includes resources to which you can also signpost new parents who are looking for networking and support.

Recognising the signs of mental ill health can be tricky and talking about it with people even trickier. Excellent training for those who work with families through the Mental Health First Aid Association <https://mhfaengland.org/> either a session to raise awareness and upskill your team or the 2 day certificated course.

SIGNPOST TO SUPPORT



<https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Supporting-New-Parents-with-Mental-Health-Challenges-Final.pdf> is an excellent and informative booklet from Care for the Family about the mental health challenges of being a new parent. It can be downloaded as PDF or obtained in hard copy from the charity directly.

<https://apni.org/> is the website of the Association for Post Natal Illness and has lots of advice, leaflets, videos and online chat.

<https://www.familylives.org.uk/> is a national parent support charity which helps families, especially during difficult times. They have a confidential helpline and also encourage networking with others in similar situations via their online community.

<https://www.home-start.org.uk/> Homestart volunteers are trained to support families, especially those who are experiencing difficulty.

<https://www.family-action.org.uk/> provide practical and emotional support for families and consultation and training for professionals.

<https://www.nct.org.uk/> The NCT describes their vision as “a world in which no parent is isolated and all parents are supported to build a strong society.” They provide various articles to read online and local courses and support groups.

<http://www.pandasfoundation.org.uk/> supports parents with peri or postnatal mental health concerns.

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-natal-depression/> Information from the NHS about post natal depression.

DADS

A 2013-2014 study found that 38% of first-time fathers are concerned about their mental health. (National Childbirth Trust. (2015)). Post-natal depression doesn't just affect mothers, around 10% of all new fathers worldwide experience postnatal depression. Do we have people on our teams who can easily talk with men? Do we have systems and activities in place that reach the dads as well as mums?

<https://www.facebook.com/pandasdads/> is a Facebook page with additional closed group aimed at supporting dads who are experiencing postnatal depression or supporting a partner who is experiencing this. The group is supported by trained volunteers.

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/> describes itself as the UK fatherhood ‘think-and-do-tank’. It focuses on policy, research and practice but helps fathers feel informed, included and empowered.

<https://www.hct.nhs.uk/media/1877/postnatal.pdf> This leaflet from Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust is a clear and concise introduction to postpartum depression in dads and describes some of the possible causes, symptoms and self-care suggestions.

SINGLE PARENTS

<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/> The charity supporting single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives.

SINGLE ADOPTERS

<https://www.homeforgood.org.uk/church-single-adopters> Advice from an adoption charity for ways in which churches can support single adopters—adopting a child is no less taxing on the mental health of the new parent and may have further complications attached to it.

rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyouthinfo/parentscarers/parentalmentalillness.aspx)



Dads in distress: Many new fathers are worried about their mental health. Retrieved from nct.org.uk/press-release/dads-distress-many-new-fathers-are-worried-about-their-mental-health

Paulson, J.F., & Bazemore, S.D. (2010). Prenatal and postpartum depression in fathers and its association with maternal depression: A meta-analysis, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 303(19), 1961-1969.

The poll of 2,000 new mothers and fathers, for the [Royal College of Nursing \(RCN\)](http://www.rcn.org/), found that less than half (46%) of those who suffered from anxiety, depression or another mental health issue considered seeking help from a healthcare professional. A quarter of those who did not seek professional support said they were too scared to do so.