

# Pregnancy Is Not Always What You Expect:

Taking care of your mental health while  
planning a pregnancy or while pregnant



*best start  
meilleur départ*

Resource Centre/Centre de ressources

by/par health *nexus* santé

Many women in their childbearing years enjoy good physical and mental health. Mental health affects how you think, feel and react to things. Positive mental health helps you:

- Feel good about yourself.
- Develop positive relationships.
- Make reasonable life decisions.

People once believed that the hormones released during pregnancy protected women's mental health. This is no longer thought to be the case. Pregnancy is a time when some women are at greater risk of becoming depressed and/or anxious.

Many people are aware of depression after birth (postpartum depression), but did you know that depression and/or anxiety during pregnancy are also very real conditions? Feeling sad, negative, anxious or angry can be very difficult. If you feel like this, you are not alone. 1 out of every 5 women will have these feelings.



### This booklet talks about some strategies to help you:

- Take care of your mental health before and during pregnancy.
- Understand the risk factors that can lead to depression or anxiety during pregnancy.
- Know if you are depressed or anxious during pregnancy.
- Get help and treatment.
- Find more information.

# Taking care of your mental health before and during pregnancy

It is important to take care of yourself all the time. This is especially true when you are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant.

**Here are some ways to build your mental health anytime:**

- Taking care of your body and mind by:
  - Eating well.
  - Being physically active often.
  - Getting enough rest and sleep.
  - Taking a multi-vitamin with iron and folic acid.
  - Building and keeping a support network of family, friends, neighbours, co-workers and others.
  - Participating in hobbies/interests and spiritual activities.
  - Taking time to relax, have fun and laugh.
  - Taking time to take care of your health.
  - Seeing your health care provider regularly.
  - Seeking help and treatment if you feel mentally or physically unwell.



Many people think of pregnancy as a happy and exciting time. While this is true for many women, it is not true for everyone. Pregnancy can stir up many feelings. It is quite normal to have a wide range of different feelings during your pregnancy.

### You may feel:

- Excitement and a feeling of accomplishment.
- Unsure about being pregnant, especially if the pregnancy was unplanned.
- A sense that the pregnancy is not real for the first few weeks or months.
- Scared about how your body and life will change.
- Concerned how the pregnancy and later the baby will affect your relationships.
- Happy one minute and crying the next.
- Less or more interest in sex.
- Frightened by dreams and nightmares about the pregnancy or life with a baby.
- Worried that something may be wrong with the baby.
- Absorbed by the pregnancy, making other things less important.
- Uncomfortable with your changing body and weight gain.
- Worried about labour, birth and the baby's arrival.
- Lonely or isolated.
- Tired and uncomfortable.
- A sense of stress to have everything ready.

These feelings are normal. Pregnancy is a time of enormous change – to your body, hormones, lifestyle, relationships and your future.

### To help you manage as you move through your pregnancy:

- Talk with your partner about how you are feeling. If you do not have a partner, talk to other people who support you and let them know how you feel.
- Use the strategies from page 2 to promote positive mental health.
- Speak to your health care provider about your mental health and well-being before and during your pregnancy.

Pregnancy is a time when you start to develop your relationship with your future baby. Reducing your stress and taking care of your mental health will help as you begin this important relationship.





## Things that increase the risk of depression or anxiety during pregnancy

While we cannot predict who will and won't develop depression and/or anxiety during pregnancy, there are some key factors that can make it more likely:

- Having depression or anxiety in the past.
- Depression or anxiety during a previous pregnancy or after birth.
- For some women, stopping antianxiety or antidepressant medication before pregnancy can increase the risk of a relapse.
- A family history of depression, anxiety or other mental illness.
- History of severe PMS (premenstrual syndrome).
- Feeling isolated or not having a good support network.
- Stress prior to or during your pregnancy (for example: loss of a loved one, a new job or recent move, difficulties in important relationships, separation from your partner).
- Emotional, physical or sexual abuse including partner abuse now or in the past.
- Unplanned pregnancy.
- Pregnancy complications.
- Difficulties in becoming pregnant.
- Having suffered a miscarriage, stillbirth or trauma during a previous pregnancy or birth.
- Being new to Canada.

# Knowing the symptoms of depression or anxiety during pregnancy

Some women find that the feelings and changes they experience during pregnancy are troubling, distressing or frightening. As many as **1 in 5 women** will feel depressed and/or anxious during their pregnancy.

## Women who have symptoms of depression during pregnancy usually:

- Have less interest or enjoyment in things they used to enjoy.
- Feel sad most of the time.

### If you are depressed or anxious...

#### You may also feel:

- Stressed and worried.
- Guilty and ashamed.
- Alone.
- Panicky.
- Frustrated.
- Angry and irritable.
- Worthless.
- Hopeless.
- That you are being punished.

#### You may feel like you:

- Have no energy.
- Have lost your appetite or feel like eating all the time.
- Cannot concentrate or struggle making decisions.
- Cry for no apparent reason.
- Sleep too much or too little.
- Don't want to spend time with your partner, family, friends or co-workers.
- Want to run away from your situation.
- Want to harm yourself or don't want to live any longer.

**It is very important to talk to your health care provider if you have any of these symptoms for more than two weeks or if you answered YES to one of these questions:**

- Are you worrying more than usual?
- Have you been feeling anxious?
- Are you less interested in your usual activities?
- Have you been feeling down, sad, irritable or hopeless?

**If you have thoughts of suicide or thoughts of hurting yourself or others, see your health care provider right away or go to your local emergency department.**

Towards the end of pregnancy some women may have strange or scary thoughts. You might see mental pictures or hear messages that keep coming back.

- These thoughts and mental pictures are usually negative and disturbing (like worrying about something being wrong with the baby).
- You cannot stop these thoughts from occurring.
- You cannot stop these pictures from coming into your head.

It helps to talk about these thoughts and images. Sometimes they will then go away or happen less often. **If you are worried about acting on these thoughts, get help from your health care provider.**

Many health care providers use the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS). It is a checklist that checks for symptoms of depression during pregnancy and after birth. Your health care provider may also ask you questions to check for symptoms of anxiety.

## Hearing other women's stories

The following stories from three women tell how they felt during their pregnancies, before they finally got help and support.

### CAROL

*It was my first pregnancy and I assumed I was just being hormonal. Often I cried over little things. Then I would think, "Oh, I'm just being stupid."*

*It wasn't unusual for my partner and me to argue, but not to this extent. I put it down to being hormonal and this must be normal during pregnancy.*

*I felt like I was trapped, my brain wasn't working properly. My partner wasn't understanding and thought I was being unreasonable. I felt like I had nowhere to go, no one to talk to, no one who would understand. I thought everyone would think I was a bad person.*

*Eight months pregnant, I was yelling at my partner.*

*I wanted him to know and understand how I was feeling, but he couldn't relate and he thought I was being difficult. I was screaming and crying. I was so frustrated and had nowhere to channel the frustration. I got in my car while it was thundering and lightning. I drove to a deserted spot and got out. It was pouring rain and I didn't know what to do. A feeling of helplessness made me think there was something so wrong with me – that it must be me causing all this tension and sadness. It must be my fault.*



### JENNA

*Towards the end of my second pregnancy I fell and hurt my ankle. I was in a new city with no friends and no transportation. I had to wait for my partner to get home until I could go and get it checked. I was actually more worried about the baby than the ankle. Thankfully, the baby was fine and my ankle felt better in a few days.*

*From that day on, I have been thinking about falling. I am having these pictures and thoughts of me lying on the ground, unable to reach the phone. My two-year old is crying and I can't help him. The unborn baby is not moving. Something bad has probably happened to him or her. Every time this comes into my head, I start to sweat, my heart starts pounding and I can't breathe. I start getting pains in my feet, my knees, my hips. I feel so bad now, I don't want to move. I am scared to leave the house. I am scared to walk.*



*What was I thinking, having another baby? I don't know if I can protect either one of them. I am supposed to be happy. I was happy the last time. Now I am just a mess. What is happening to me?*

## AMANDA

*The car is stifling. Despite the heat, I have the windows up to muffle my cries. I've parked the car randomly across from the local hospital. I cling to my expanded belly and rock back and forth. I rock, not to comfort my unborn child, but to comfort myself.*

*"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I cannot stop repeating this chant. Moments earlier I had been driving recklessly through the streets of our suburb, fighting the urge to steer into oncoming traffic and erase the pain.*

*Nine months pregnant, I drove to the emergency department desperate for help, but I can't act. The fear of losing my child – what if children's services take my baby away? – keeps me from going inside.*

*Throughout my pregnancy there were episodes of uncontrollable sobbing; times spent screaming on the bathroom floor. I had feelings of loneliness, isolation, guilt and shame. I wasn't excited about the birth of my child. I felt numb.*

*Disconnected. It was as if I was trapped between my inner-world and the outside world. I felt as if I was losing my mind and had no idea what was happening to me.*



Carol, Jenna and Amanda are describing symptoms of prenatal depression and anxiety. If you are having similar symptoms, remember:

- It is not your fault.
- You are not alone.
- There is help available.

# Getting help and treatment

Shame, guilt and fear can prevent you from talking about how you are feeling. If you have been feeling depressed or anxious before or during pregnancy for more than two weeks, it is time to get help. This is important for your health and your developing baby. Depression or anxiety in pregnancy can affect you, your pregnancy, your partner and your family. The symptoms may continue or get worse after you have had your baby, especially if you don't get treatment.

**Know you are not alone. It is not your fault. There is help available and with help you can get better.**

Here is a list of health care providers you can call:

- Your family doctor, obstetrician, or midwife.
- Your nurse practitioner.
- Your local public health unit for programs such as Healthy Babies Healthy Children.
- A community mental health service.
- The provincial mental health helpline at 1 866-531-2600 or by chat or email at [www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca](http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca).
- Your local hospital.
- 911 (in an emergency).

Remember, your health care provider might not know what you are thinking and feeling. It is best if you talk about your thoughts and feelings – even if they may scare you.

## Things to help

There are several options that can make depression and anxiety better during pregnancy. These include:

- Self-care.
- Physical activity.
- Support.
- Counselling.
- Medication.

## Self-Care

Regardless of the kind of treatments that you choose, you need to take care of yourself. Use the strategies from page 2 to take care of your mental health.

## Physical Activity

Regular physical activity is another excellent way to make your mental health better during pregnancy. Women who are active have lower rates of depression and anxiety. Women who start mild to moderate physical activity such as walking, find they have more energy and a better mood in just a few weeks. You don't need to join a gym to get exercise.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that all healthy pregnant women exercise for 30 minutes at a time at a moderate intensity (such as brisk walking) on 4 days of the week. For more information on active living during pregnancy, visit <http://parc.ophea.net/resources>. Even though exercise is safe and helpful during pregnancy, it is always a good idea to check with your health care provider first, especially if you have not been active lately.

## Support

Many women find the support from other women very helpful during this time. Having support from other women and hearing their stories will let you know that you are not alone. Find a community of women who can support you. Here are some places that may offer groups or help you find a group:

- Your public health unit.
- Community mental health program/crisis centre.
- EarlyON – Ontario’s child and family centres.
- Life With a Baby groups.

Your family and friends can also provide a lot of support. Ask them to learn about depression and anxiety in pregnancy. Make sure they are aware of what you are going through.

## Counselling

Individual counselling may be the right treatment for you. Group sessions can provide you with much-needed support.

You may find a counsellor through:

- Your health care provider (e.g. obstetrician, midwife, family doctor, nurse practitioner).
- A community mental health program/crisis centre.
- A private counsellor through your yellow pages.
- Your local public health unit – they have information about community services that offer mental health counselling.
- Your Employee Assistance Provider (EAP), if your workplace provides this service.

## Medication

Medications are an effective strategy to treat depression and anxiety during pregnancy. You may feel concerned about taking medications while pregnant. Many medications have shown little or no effect on unborn babies and can be used by pregnant women. You and your health care provider need to talk about what is best for you and your unborn baby.

Things to consider:

- How are your feelings and symptoms affecting you, your pregnancy and your relationships?
- How severe are your symptoms?
- Have you needed medication to treat these symptoms in the past?
- What have research studies shown about the safety of this medication during pregnancy?
- Are other treatments, such as counselling, available for you?
- Would taking medication help you feel ready for other treatments, such as counselling?



# Finding more information

## To find your local public health unit:

Visit [www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx)

A public health nurse can help you find the right service in your community. Many services are available at the health unit or other locations in your community. A public health nurse can also give you personal support.

## Mental Health Helpline:

1-866-531-2600 is available 24 hours, 7 days a week or visit [www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca](http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca)

The counsellor who answers the phone can give you brief counselling and tell you about mental health services available in your community. You can also communicate with them by email or web chat.

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Some of the following resources are written for depression or anxiety after birth, but they can be just as helpful if you are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant.

## Resources and Websites:

### Coping with Anxiety During Pregnancy and Following the Birth

[www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/bcrmh\\_anxietyguide\\_final.pdf](http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/bcrmh_anxietyguide_final.pdf)

### Life with A Baby – Perinatal mood disorder resources in Ontario

[www.lifewithababy.com/Links\\_and\\_Resources](http://www.lifewithababy.com/Links_and_Resources)

### Depression During Pregnancy

[www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/pregnancy/depression-during-pregnancy.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/pregnancy/depression-during-pregnancy.html)

### Postpartum Depression

[www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health\\_information/a\\_z\\_mental\\_health\\_and\\_addiction\\_information/Postpartum\\_depression/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/a_z_mental_health_and_addiction_information/Postpartum_depression/Pages/default.aspx)

### Managing Depression: A Self-Help Skills Resource for Women Living with Depression During Pregnancy, After Delivery and Beyond

[www.beststart.org/resources/ppmd/DepressionWorkbook\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.beststart.org/resources/ppmd/DepressionWorkbook_ENG.pdf)

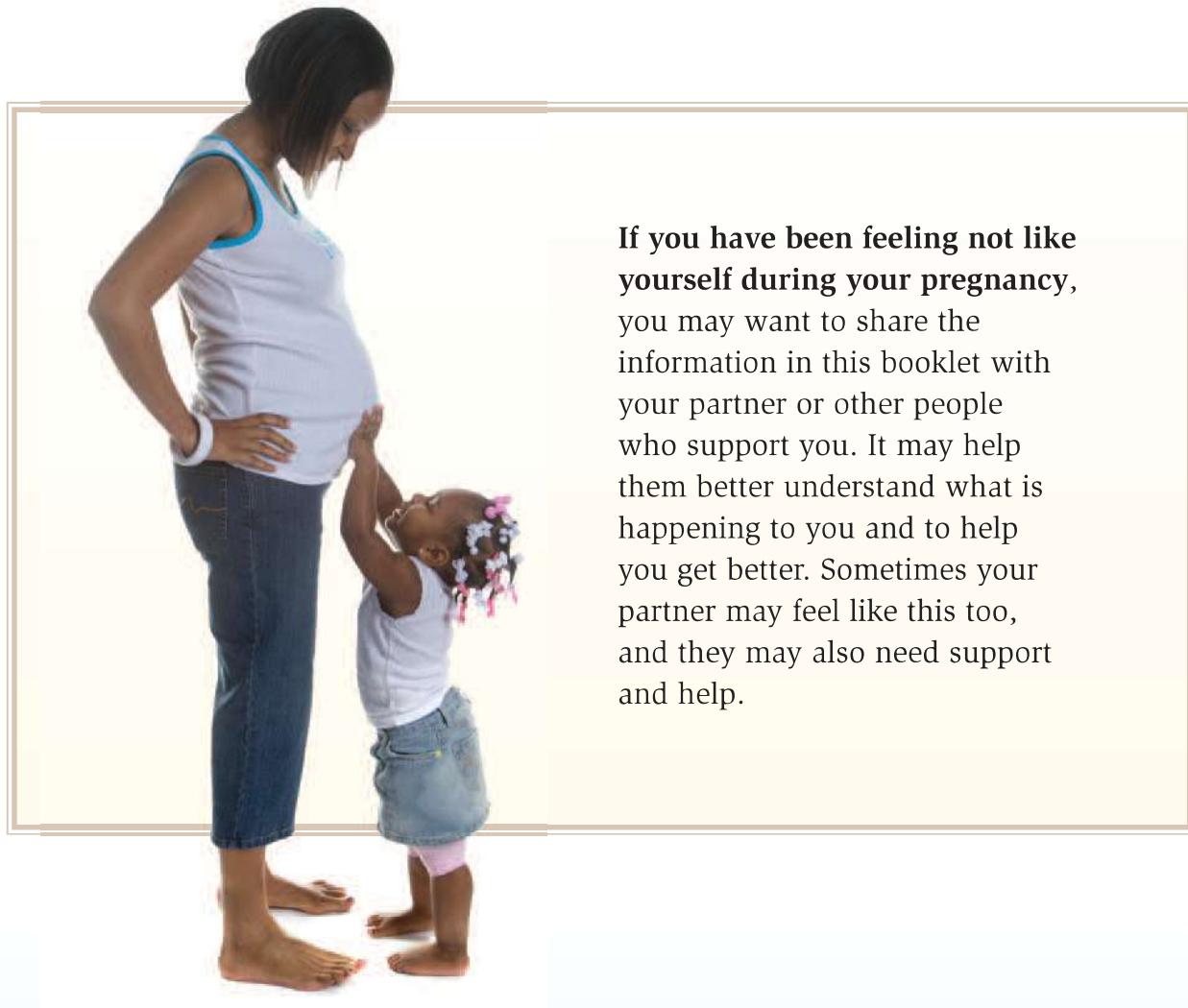
## Books:

### Postpartum Depression and Anxiety. A Self-help Guide for Mothers.

By Pacific Post Partum Support Society. 2014.

### Beyond the Blues: Understanding and Treating Prenatal and Postpartum Depression and Anxiety.

By Shoshanna Bennett PHD and Pec Indman EdD, MFT: Moodswings Rev. 2011.



If you have been feeling not like yourself during your pregnancy, you may want to share the information in this booklet with your partner or other people who support you. It may help them better understand what is happening to you and to help you get better. Sometimes your partner may feel like this too, and they may also need support and help.

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