

"..and how are you feeling?"



Women experience a whole range of emotions after giving birth. Joy, elation, wonder and relief are all common feelings. So are feelings of being overwhelmed, exhausted, sad or depressed. The responsibility for a tiny infant can make us look at life differently. It marks a new beginning. It can also make us feel very vulnerable. Caring for a baby is both rewarding and demanding. We need all the support we can get and sometimes we feel very alone.

This leaflet describes some of the feelings women experience after they have a baby, answering questions like:

- ▲ What are the things that make motherhood a positive experience?
- ▲ How common is feeling depressed?
- ▲ What contributes to depression at this time?
- ▲ What helps if you're feeling down: is there light at the end of the tunnel?

We hope that the information in this leaflet will be helpful in acknowledging the range of feelings you may experience in the coming months.

“..and how are *you* feeling?”

What contributes to a sense of well-being for mothers?

Watching a child grow and develop, being loved and being needed - these are the things which women identify as the joys and rewards of motherhood. Even when motherhood also brings difficult or negative feelings, these positive aspects are still very present for most of us.

Women who feel most positive about life with a young baby usually have lots of support. This time can be very demanding and it makes a difference when partners, family and friends are really involved. Being able to share the responsibility for a new infant helps to make the experience a more positive one.

A good physical recovery from the birth also contributes to feeling well emotionally. Good health certainly makes coping with a baby much easier. And women who manage to get some time for themselves also say that this makes a big difference to how they feel - even if it is only an hour or two a week when someone else looks after the baby.

But sometimes recovery after the birth is slow. Sometimes partners are working long hours and aren't at home much. Family may be a long way away. And the effort of finding someone you feel happy to leave the baby with may seem all too much. Or your baby may be difficult to leave.

“Motherhood is one of the most rewarding and demanding jobs...”

Despite the wonderful feelings about having a baby, it's easy sometimes to feel overwhelmed and very alone.



Feeling depressed is not uncommon

In recent years there has been quite a lot of research about women's feelings and emotional health after birth. In Australia, and in other parts of the world, studies have shown that about 1 in 6 women experience depression following the birth of a baby. In Victoria that means around 10,000 women every year.

Often the feelings are short-lived, but for many women they can last for weeks, months, or even longer. Feeling depressed may happen shortly after the baby is born or it may develop later.

What contributes to depression?

There are many different beliefs about what contributes to depression following the birth of a baby. Only some of these beliefs are supported by research. There are a few things that seem to be clearly linked with depression at this time.



Feeling unsupported

Women who do not have partners, who are having relationship problems, or who feel unsupported are more likely to feel depressed. Coping 'alone' can be very difficult.

Feeling alone

A sense of isolation is something women also describe as contributing to depression.

Isolation may stem from living in a remote area, not having easy access to transport, feeling cut off from friends or family. It can make life with a new baby feel very hard.

Feeling exhausted

Being constantly tired, needing to be 'on-call' 24 hours a day, 7 days a week is a common experience for mothers with young infants.

When there is no relief, it's understandable that some women get depressed. Without adequate sleep, it can be difficult enough to feel human, let alone to feel happy.

*"I'd never known that kind of tiredness.
I was just completely overwhelmed with it."*



Feeling physically unwell

Physical health problems after the birth of a baby are also linked with feeling depressed. This is hardly surprising when you think about all the energy needed to care for a baby. Women who have had a difficult birth may take much longer to recover physically and as a result their emotional health may suffer as well. Other health problems, especially if they are ongoing, also make it harder to cope with all the demands of being a mother.

Having a sick or difficult baby

All babies can be difficult at times, but some babies are much more unsettled and difficult to manage than others. Some babies are unwell.

Caring for a sick or difficult baby can be very draining. It can also be more difficult to get out and about with the baby or to leave the baby with other people. This can certainly contribute to feeling isolated, not coping and depression.

“It just seemed to be getting on top of me, that this baby was just crying non-stop - an hour’s sleep if I was lucky...”

It is important to recognise that babies are different. The reason

another mother may be coping more easily could well be because her baby sleeps better, feeds more easily or is more placid.

Feeling it’s impossible to be a ‘good’ mother

The realities of caring for a baby are often very different from ideal pictures of motherhood. Most women feel at some time that it’s almost impossible to be a ‘good’ mother. Without a lot of support from people who care, such feelings can lead to a more general sense of failure and feelings of depression.



What do women find helpful when they feel depressed?

Women have rarely been asked this question. In a study conducted in Victoria in 1991, we found that there were some common themes in women's answers.

Finding someone to talk to

- ▲ Many women who've been depressed say that letting someone know how you're feeling can be an important turning point. Finding someone you feel able to talk to - someone who really listens - can be helpful. Having another person acknowledge what's happening helps share the burden.
- ▲ Many women find it helpful to talk with a friend or family member, especially if they are a good listener and understand what mothering a small infant is like.
- ▲ Talk with other mothers about the highs and lows of your experience - you may be surprised how often other women will share your feelings. Other mothers may also have helpful suggestions about what's worked for them when the baby's unsettled, or they've felt like they weren't coping.
- ▲ If you are feeling isolated, down or depressed, you may find it helpful to let your maternal and child health nurse know. The nurse is there for you as well as the baby. Or talk with your doctor. Finding the right person to talk to may take time, but when you do find the right person it just might make all the difference.

“Just talking - just having someone impartial who listens. Just talking through all sorts of things was good.”



“My GP just offers to talk things through. It's not a cure, but it really helps.”



Sharing the work

As a community we often forget just how much work is involved in caring for a baby. There is all the feeding and washing, the getting up at night, the lifting and carrying. All these physical demands can leave you feeling exhausted and completely drained.

- ▲ Sharing some of this workload if you are able to, can restore some energy to enjoy the positive aspects of having a baby. Let your partner, friends or family know exactly what sort of assistance would really be helpful. Accept any offers you get!

Time for yourself

This can seem like something gone forever when you have a baby! Meeting a baby's needs can take up almost every waking moment. Yet becoming a mother doesn't mean our own needs to be cared for and to pursue our own interests just disappear.

- ▲ Women who manage to get even a little time out on a regular basis say it makes a huge difference to how they feel and cope with the demands of being a mother. You may feel now that you want to spend all your time with your new baby. Over the weeks and months to come though, you may find that short breaks from baby care can give you a well-earned rest, and a chance to do something just for yourself.
- ▲ Having regular breaks makes it easier to cope with the demanding times - when you're tired or the baby is unsettled. Mothers often find it hard to ask for this time out, but your partner, friends or family will probably enjoy their own special time with the baby.
- ▲ Occasional childcare services might also be a way of getting some regular time out.
- ▲ Or find another mother (or mothers) with whom you could form a 'time out' club. Take it in turns to look after the babies and give each other some time for self-centred activities! Leaving your baby can sometimes feel hard, so sharing the experience with another mother often helps.



“You’re doing a good job...”

This is a very demanding period in your life. Women often describe being on a roller coaster emotionally. As mothers what we often need most is acknowledgment and understanding. There aren't always solutions to the difficulties we face. Small offers of help or simply being told we're doing a good job can be a turning point.

“It was not that the maternal and child health nurse offered any miraculous cure, but I felt she really understood what I was talking about and that was helpful”

“My child’s older, I think less demanding. My health’s better. It just seems like I’ve reached the light at the end of the tunnel.”

“My husband started to make the effort to come home just a little bit earlier...he sees this role as being harder than what he does at work.”

“The best thing for me was that I had a very supportive friend... who’d already had a child... She used to ring every day, and offer really good advice. And she’d say there’s light at the end of the tunnel...And there is.”

What is PRISM and how might it help?

PRISM stands for Program of Resources, Information and Support for Mothers. It is a community project in your local area. PRISM is designed to provide women who have recently had a baby with more supportive local services in recognition that motherhood isn't always easy.

Your local maternal and child health nurse and some of your area's GPs have recently participated in a special training program to update them on the common issues and problems women experience after the birth of a baby. They have also learned more about what women find helpful and about relevant local services. We hope this will mean that when you see your maternal and child health nurse or GP they will be encouraging and supportive about any issues you want to raise with them.

The kit you have received is also a part of PRISM. It gives you relevant information about your own health issues following the birth of your baby and about support services available to you locally. The leaflet for fathers talks about the importance of their support and things they might experience.

There is also a book of vouchers for local services. We hope you find them useful and that they encourage you to explore some mother friendly services and activities in your local area. Getting out and about in your own community, finding things you enjoy doing by yourself, or with your baby, can really help in this demanding period of your life.

Finally, look out for some local opportunities for meeting people, especially other mothers. To help break down the isolation we often feel when we're at home with young children, PRISM is supporting a range of opportunities for mothers to stay in touch, meet people and make friends. Ask your maternal and child health nurse about what's happening in your area.

