

A GUIDE TO MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH

Healthy mind, healthy motherhood

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To know more about mental health,
visit www.whiteswanfoundation.org

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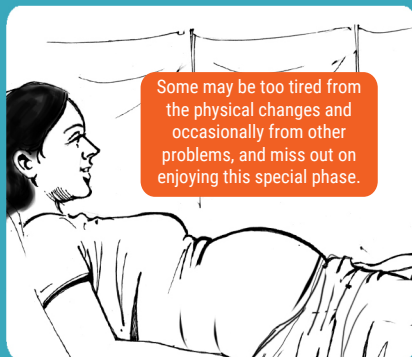
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Introduction

As a nurse, I meet so many women who come to this hospital to have their babies.



Some of them are excited, some are concerned, some are glowing!



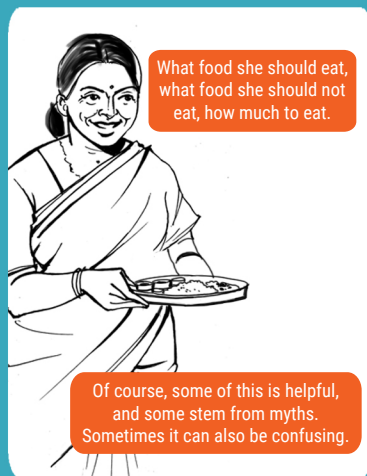
Some may be too tired from the physical changes and occasionally from other problems, and miss out on enjoying this special phase.



Often, spouses and family members accompany, support, and give her their advice.



How to take care of her back, how to tell if the baby is a girl or a boy, whether she should exercise or not.



What food she should eat, what food she should not eat, how much to eat.

Of course, some of this is helpful, and some stem from myths. Sometimes it can also be confusing.

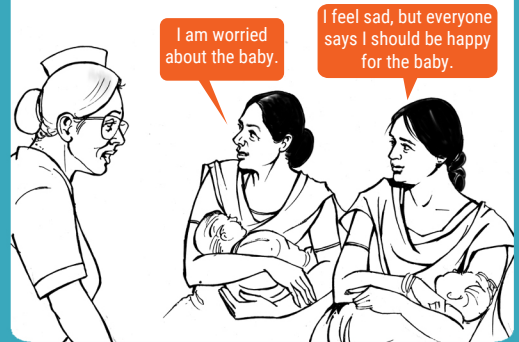
The list is endless, you know! Yet, there is one important thing everyone is missing. What is it, you ask?



The one thing not often mentioned to expectant mothers is taking care of their mental health...



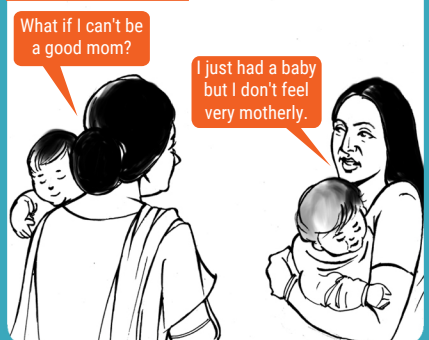
Some mothers say...



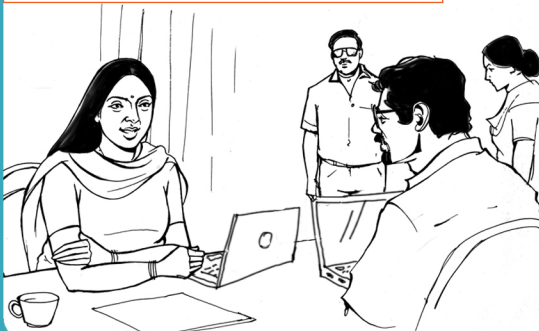
They find it rather challenging...



And might have some self-doubts too...



When we support them and address these issues, they can cope with their worries and fully enjoy their pregnancy...



How true it is: when the mother stays well, the baby stays well too! You agree, don't you?

Understanding pregnancy



Pregnancy

Emotional wellbeing during pregnancy

An expectant mother experiences several physiological changes during this period as her body tries to accommodate the baby. She may experience nausea and vomiting, weight gain, increase in heart rate, swelling of feet, a possible increase in the size of the kidney and liver, and stretching of the abdominal muscles. During this period, there are also drastic hormonal changes – more than at any other period of her life.

These physical and hormonal changes can be stressful for some. For some others, the symptoms may not be noticeable or intense and that's okay too. Involve your family in healthcare and daily tasks so you have support and can care for yourself.



Talk to your doctor about:

- Your physical health. Get their suggestions on how much activity you should be involved in, and how much rest you need
- Any mood changes you may be experiencing

Remember to ask your doctor, nurse or Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA worker) all your questions. If you feel overwhelmed, talk to a trusted friend or a counselor*.

*Refer to page 26 for a list of mental health resources.

Anxiety issues



- *Will I be a good mom?*
- *Is my baby okay?*
- *How will we manage our expenses?*
- *My body aches a little...*
- *I don't really sleep eight hours at a stretch, am I ok?*
- *What if labor is painful? Can I handle it?*

It is perfectly normal to have these anxious thoughts about your health and the baby. So many mothers have these concerns, and there's no need to fret about them unless they interfere with your daily life.

However, the following symptoms may indicate that you're experiencing prenatal anxiety and that you may benefit from seeking help:

- Persistent worrying thoughts that do not subside
- Constantly feeling restless, irritable or on edge
- Panic attacks, and overwhelming pangs of fear
- Frequent palpitations
- Finding it hard to fall asleep at night

Remember to talk to your doctor about your worries, especially if they keep you from your daily routine, or if you lose interest in things you were interested in earlier.



Mood issues



- *I feel tired*
- *I feel like I'm constantly throwing up*
- *I break into tears for no reason*
- *I feel so restless and irritable*
- *My body is losing shape*

Many people think pregnancy is all about joy and happiness. But it can also be a time when you feel tired, overwhelmed, and worried about your health and the baby.

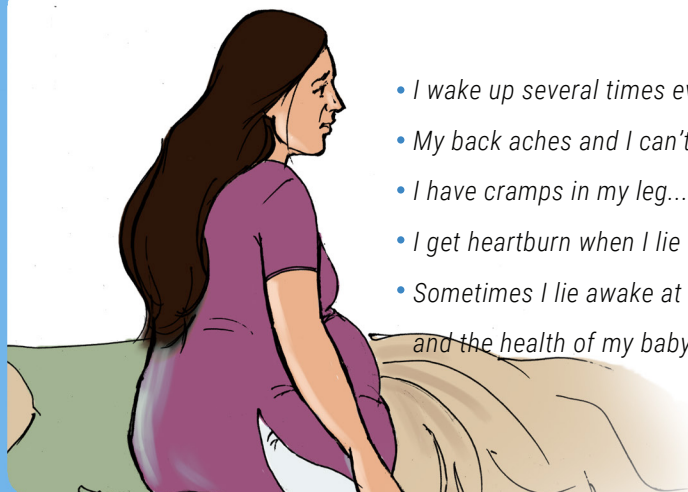


Talk to your doctor if you experience more than one of these symptoms for a period of two weeks:

- You constantly feel sad, moody, irritable and often feel like crying
- You are not interested in food or eating even when you don't experience nausea
- You experience continuous sleep disturbances
- You constantly feel exhausted, agitated or restless
- You feel worthless or guilty
- You lose interest in your hobbies or your favourite activities
- You find it very hard to concentrate
- You constantly feel helpless, hopeless and/or have thoughts of suicide*

***If you have thoughts about ending your life, contact a mental health professional or helpline immediately. Refer to the list of resources on page 26.**

Sleep issues



- *I wake up several times every night to use the bathroom*
- *My back aches and I can't sleep very well*
- *I have cramps in my leg...ouch!*
- *I get heartburn when I lie down*
- *Sometimes I lie awake at night thinking about the birth and the health of my baby...*

With all the physiological and hormonal changes, an expectant mother may not be sleeping as well as she usually does. And that's only to be expected. Remember to tell your doctor about any issues you might be experiencing. And don't take any medication without your doctor's advice.

What you can do:

- Light exercise
- Create your own unwinding ritual: a warm bath, listening to light music or having a conversation with your spouse
- Drink a lot of fluids through the day
- Nap when you're feeling sleepy
- Have an early dinner and a light snack or a beverage before you go to bed
- Use extra pillows to support your back and tummy



Is it true?



Everyone around me says I should eat for two... should I be doing that?

No, you don't need to eat for two. What you do need to ensure is that you're eating when you're hungry and that you maintain a balanced diet.



My family is holding a *godh bharaai* (*seemantha* or *baby shower*) next month...will it help make labor less painful?

These rituals are not related to labor pains, and rather are for the mother's happiness, and a celebration of the arrival of the baby.



My family doesn't allow me to step out after 6 pm. They say that the baby and I will be attacked by an evil spirit.

Not at all. We meet so many women who go out in the evening, and they aren't affected by it. Gently discuss this with whoever is stopping you.



For the expectant father



Congratulations!

You're going to be a dad, and your family is going to welcome a new member soon. I'm sure this is an exciting time for you. You can support your spouse by asking her how she's feeling, and taking over some of the household tasks so she can get some rest. Ensure she has nutritious food to eat.

Be supportive and ask her what she needs. You may have a lot of questions and worries about your partner's health, and about how you both will manage with the baby.

"Spouses can be...supportive, understanding, and also realize that there could be mood fluctuations during pregnancy. And also reporting any serious concerns that he has about her mental or physical health, I think that's important. Being supportive throughout pregnancy and also through the labor will go a long way."

- Dr Latha Venkatram, Obstetrician and Gynecologist



☒ Pregnancy checklist


At your next appointment, remember to discuss the following with your obstetrician:

1. How you are doing physically ☐
2. Any changes or fluctuation in your moods ☐
3. Whether you feel stressed or fatigued ☐
4. What your sleeping patterns are like ☐
5. What your eating patterns are like ☐
6. Whether you are able to focus on your work and everyday tasks ☐
7. What you are concerned about ☐
8. Whether you are getting enough activity and rest ☐
9. How supportive your family is ☐
10. Your mental health history, including whether you've had emotional problems in the past and any counselors or mental health professionals you've met ☐
11. Any medication you may be taking for your mental health ☐

Understanding motherhood



So you've just had a baby, congratulations!
Here are some things you should know
about being a new mother...

- 
- It's normal to feel tired and weak for the first two or three weeks after the delivery
 - Enrich your diet with nourishing foods to regain your strength. Talk to your doctor about what foods to eat, and what to avoid
 - You may feel tired and find it hard to focus in the first few weeks. But if you think this is keeping you from caring for your baby, talk to your doctor about it
 - Involve your spouse and family to support you in caring for the baby so you get adequate rest. Ensure that you and your spouse spend quality time together

The family's role



As the spouse:

- Support the mother in bonding with the baby
- Help the mother soothe the baby
- Ensure that the new mother is stress-free and well-rested, so she can feed the baby
- Plan the immunization of the baby
- Help her negotiate stresses caused by socio-cultural barriers (For example, by rituals, or the family's reaction to the gender of the baby)



How can family help?

- Support the new family unit without being intrusive
- Take over some tasks of caring for the baby, so the mother gets enough rest
- Offer the new parents space to care for the baby and offer advice only when asked

Mother-baby bonding

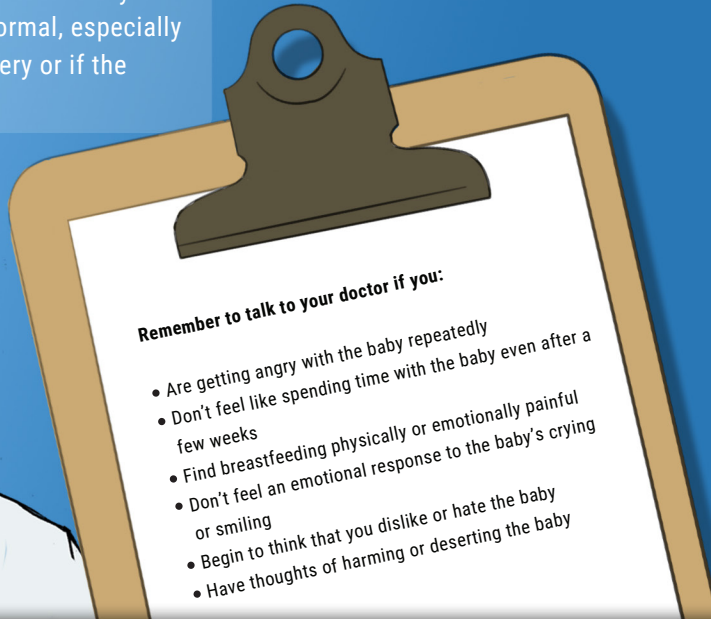


Bonding with your baby

“I was told that I’ll feel an instant love towards my baby. But all I feel at the moment is exhausted...”



Not all women bond with their babies immediately after birth. Some begin to bond with the baby when they are still in the womb, and some others take time to bond. You may feel fatigue and tiredness right now due to depletion from the birth. You may find it challenging to get used to your new routine, and may also wonder if you are capable of caring for the baby. Don't worry or feel guilty about this. This is normal, especially if you have had a difficult delivery or if the baby has been unwell.



“It’s okay not to feel great love for the baby because you are tired, you are exhausted, the baby is small, difficult to manage, sometimes cranky. So it’s okay to not feel like a supermom and to let your feelings develop.”

Mood issues

"I feel so sad and low all the time..."



Most women feel low and tired a week or two after the birth. This phenomenon is called postpartum blues and usually gets better on its own. But for some women, the feelings of sadness persist longer, makes them lethargic and unable to care for the baby. This is called postpartum depression and may be caused by the physical and hormonal changes of childbirth. If you notice thoughts about harming yourself or harming the baby, remember to reach out to your doctor or a counselor immediately.

Speak to your doctor if you experience any of these signs for more than two weeks at a stretch:

- Frequent crying spells
- Consistent low self-esteem and doubts
- Feeling helpless and irritated
- Constant worry
- Lack of interest in taking care of the baby
- Excessive worry



Anxiety issues

“Am I worrying too much about my baby?”



You may have many worries about your baby's health, feeding, and about whether you'll be able to take care of the baby well enough. This is perfectly normal for a new mother.

Talk to your doctor if you experience:

- Constant feelings of restlessness and irritability
- A difficulty in falling asleep even when you're tired and the baby is asleep
- Constant and intrusive thoughts that keep you from doing your daily tasks
- Thoughts that make you check in on the baby repeatedly
- Fear of being alone with the baby



Body image issues

- *I feel so fat and unattractive!*
- *The scar on my abdomen looks so ugly*
- *But my friend got back to shape so quickly!*

Why am I still fat?

- *My husband goes to work every day
but I am stuck at home with the baby*



Remember that the weight doesn't go off immediately. It may take a few months. What happened with a cousin or a friend doesn't necessarily have to be the same for you - each woman's body is different. And don't compare yourself to celebrities - they have an entire entourage taking care of them, and professional help to get back into shape quickly!

As a new mother, it may take some time for you to come to terms with how your body looks after the birth of the baby; and you may not be able to diet or exercise for a few weeks or months after the birth.

It's natural to have these thoughts because you're still coming to terms with your new body. Check with your doctor about when it's okay to go back to your fitness routine. Take time off for yourself, and find other ways of caring for yourself: Groom yourself or meet a friend. But remember to talk to your doctor if:

- You have recurring thoughts about how you look
- You are severely dieting or binge eating for more than a week



Sleep issues

"With the baby waking up all night, nappy changes and feeding, I feel like I haven't slept well for ages..."



Sleep issues among new mothers are common. But remember to talk to your doctor about your sleep issues, and don't self-medicate!



Giving birth can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Babies tend to wake up for feeds through the night. This can affect your sleeping patterns. Some mothers are able to get back to a sleep routine gradually, but some others have trouble sleeping.

Some of the measures you took during pregnancy will help here as well. What you can do to sleep better:

- Try some deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques
- Involve your spouse in caring for the baby
- Get a massage from your spouse or family member before bedtime

But if you're not able to sleep even when you're exhausted or when the baby is sleeping soundly, you may have postpartum insomnia. Talk to your doctor about possible treatment options.

Breastfeeding



"I just don't seem to be able to get the hang of breastfeeding..."

For most mothers, it takes a while to get used to breastfeeding and be able to do it with ease. New mothers may experience pain, or have trouble getting the baby to latch on. It can take three to six weeks to establish a painless, comfortable feeding routine. This is normal. Every baby has its own pattern of feeding: how often they need to be fed, how much, and how long - there is no set rule about it.

There are several myths about breastfeeding. While breastfeeding contributes to the physical and emotional wellbeing of the child, what works best for the mental health of the child is to have the mother do what seems right to her. Ensure you speak to your doctor and lactation consultant so you can arrive at a decision that's best for you and your baby.

Make sure you talk to your gynecologist or meet a lactation consultant if:

- The baby isn't able to latch on at all even after a week of trying
- Your nipples are sore or your breasts feel engorged and uncomfortable even after a month of breastfeeding
- You notice any lumps in your breasts



Postpartum psychosis



Postpartum psychosis is a rare mental illness that can affect a woman in the early days or weeks after the baby is born.

The signs of postpartum psychosis are:

- Rapid changes in mood
- Being abnormally restless and irritable
- Talking very fast or appearing confused
- Behavior that's out of the ordinary: talking to people in an overfamiliar way, or discussing personal matters with them
- Being drastically more social or less social than usual
- Paranoia, suspicion, a belief that they are in danger
- Hearing or seeing things that others don't hear or see
- Feeling like harming themselves or the baby

Postpartum psychosis is a psychiatric emergency. With immediate care and treatment, the mother can recover fully.

If you notice any of these signs in your partner or family member who's recently had a baby, meet the nearest psychiatrist as soon as possible.



☒ **New motherhood**

At your next appointment, remember to speak to your obstetrician about:

1. How you feel physically ☐
2. How you are feeling emotionally ☐
3. Whether you are feeling sad ☐
4. Any behavior in yourself that's out of the ordinary ☐
5. Your food habits ☐
6. Your sleeping patterns ☐
7. Any concerns you have about your own health or the baby ☐
8. How supportive your family is ☐
9. Your emotions towards the baby ☐
10. Concerns about breastfeeding ☐
11. Any worries or intrusive worries or thoughts you have ☐

Seeking help for mental health issues

Motherhood can be a joyful experience, and an overwhelming one in many ways. We hope this booklet will help you in understanding your experience.

If you're concerned about your emotional wellbeing, make sure to talk about it with your gynecologist. If you need further support, you could consult the list of helplines, where you will be offered non-judgmental listening, short-term counseling and references to resources you can access, should you need them.

Alternatively, you could consult a psychologist or a psychiatrist near you.

Resources:

Parivarthan Counselling Helpline (Bangalore):

07676602602

Monday to Friday, 4 pm to 10 pm

Perinatal Psychiatry Clinic, NIMHANS (Bangalore):

080 26995272/5251/5279 or write to

perinatalnimhans@gmail.com

Fridays, 9 am to 2 pm

Sahai (Bangalore):

080-25497777

Monday to Saturday, 10 am to 6 pm

TISS iCALL (Mumbai):

022-25521111/ 022-25563291 or write to *icall@tiss.edu*


Monday to Saturday, 8 am to 10 pm


About White Swan Foundation for Mental Health


White Swan Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to the mission of delivering knowledge services on mental health and wellbeing. With India's largest knowledge repository on mental health for the people at www.whiteswanfoundation.org, we aim to disseminate valuable information on mental health to various communities and help them make informed decisions. This eBook is a small step towards that effort. Created with the guidance of the Perinatal Psychiatry Clinic at NIMHANS, Bangalore, and obstetrician and lactation consultant Dr Shaibya Saldanha, we hope that this book helps you understand maternal mental health better. Please share this with your loved ones so they can benefit from the knowledge that it offers.

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We'd like to reach out to a wide audience and are keen on partnering with individuals and organizations that share our mission. You can write to us connect@whiteswanfoundation.org

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