



# HOW TO...

## care for families experiencing peri/postnatal depression or anxiety

Sikunye seeks to equip and support churches to care for families in the First Thousand Days (FTD). This reflection is part of a series of resources aimed at equipping church members to care for families facing particular challenges.

Listen to audio recording [here](#)  
Watch the video recording [here](#)

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

### Philippians 4: 6-7

Studies show that about 30% of women experience postnatal depression in South Africa. And, unfortunately, many parents feel a lot of judgment, shame, and guilt and so remain silent about their struggles. Mental health is often misunderstood and families experiencing it need additional care and support. This is why we are talking about it: informed, caring church members can journey with families and help them get the specific care they need.

Hence is it important to think about how we can care well for moms and dads who find themselves grappling with depression and/or anxiety. Mental health is generally a misunderstood topic. It is important for us to positively reframe and normalise perinatal and postnatal depression and anxiety.

### what is postnatal depression?

Postnatal depression is the name given to depression that develops between one month and up to one year after the birth of a baby. Pre-natal and post-natal



depression affects about 1 in every 3 women who give birth in South Africa each year (Van Niekerk et al., 2017, p. 10) Dads are also known to have postnatal depression – so please look out for this in dad too.

It's important that mom (and dad) are aware of the signs of postnatal depression and seek help if they are not coping. All parents go through a period of adjustment as they try to handle the huge changes a baby brings. For most people, this time of adjustment will be temporary and will not be overly distressing.

*"I also had postnatal depression with my first son, I didn't want anything to do with him because I was disappointed in myself and I felt misunderstood by my family. Sometimes there are people, but depression does make you feel isolated".*

*Attendee at Sikunye event*

Many women experience the **'baby blues'** in the first few days after having a baby. The baby blues usually only last 2 to 3 days and you might feel teary, anxious and moody during that time. The support of a partner, family and friends is usually enough to help mom get through it. When these feelings last beyond these early days and continue to get worse, it may be a sign of developing depression. There are also other mental health conditions that can develop during pregnancy and after birth that mom should seek professional support for.

## spotting the signs of postnatal depression

If you think mom is depressed, encourage her to talk about her feelings to you, a friend, or her health care provider. There are many signs that mom may be struggling with postnatal depression. Some of the more common ones include:

- having a very low mood
- frequent crying for no obvious reason
- feeling inadequate and a failure as a mother
- having difficulty bonding with their baby, looking after them only as a duty and not wanting to play with them
- constantly worrying that something is wrong with their baby, regardless of reassurance
- having a sense of hopelessness about the future
- feeling exhausted, empty, sad, and teary
- feeling guilty, ashamed, or worthless
- feeling anxious or panicky
- having trouble sleeping, sleep for too long or have nightmares
- feeling scared of being alone or going out
- withdrawing from contact with other people

- speaking negatively all the time and claiming that they are hopeless
- neglecting themselves, such as not washing or changing their clothes
- losing all sense of time, such as being unaware whether 10 minutes or 2 hours have passed
- losing their sense of humour

In some cases, mom may experience thoughts about leaving her family or worried that her partner may leave her. She could also have ideas about self-harm or doing harm to her partner or baby. It is also common for mom to experience symptoms of anxiety at the same time as depression. These symptoms can affect moms day-to-day life and relationship with her baby, family and friends. In situations like this, mom should seek professional help straight away.

**refer** mom for help if she does not know where to go (e.g. **SADAG** or local services)

Fathers and partners can also become depressed after the birth of a baby, and should also seek help.

## how is postnatal depression diagnosed?

If mom has had any of these symptoms for 2 weeks or more, she must talk to her doctor or midwife. Mom can also visit her local clinic or look for an organisation offering mental health services. Postnatal depression needs to be properly diagnosed and managed by a trained healthcare professional.

## edinburgh postnatal depression scale

**The Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS)** is a questionnaire that asks about mom's feelings and symptoms. The EPDS indicates whether she may have some symptoms that are common with depression and anxiety. Do an [online questionnaire](#) to see if mom has postnatal depression.

## treating postnatal depression

A range of different treatments can help with postnatal depression, including:

- counselling
- psychotherapy
- group treatment
- support strategies
- medications such as antidepressants
- support from family and friends is also important

## key take aways from interview with Liesl Hermanus

❖ *Registered counsellor and maternal support coordinator from the Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP) based in Hanover Park MOU, Cape Town.*

### 1. Can this also happen to dad?

Research shows that fathers are also at risk of depression and anxiety, especially for first time fathers. They can experience changes in mood, feelings and thinking post birth especially post a traumatic birth experience.

### 2. What do we, as people who are supporting moms and dads, do if we notice something or flags are raised?

Being supported and listened to is very helpful. Lack of support is a risk factor for poor mental health. People tend to withdraw and isolate themselves when struggling with depression and anxiety.

Flags to take note of: persistent low mood, being withdrawn, changes in behaviour, very negative talk, low self-care, irritability, anger, guilt, suicidal ideation, self-harm, constantly worried, uneasy, or constant fear – if you notice this, it could be that they are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Try normalising what mom is experiencing – that having a baby can be a big adjustment and can be extremely overwhelming.

Reflect back to mom: “I am here for you”, “I have noticed that you not coping as well as before...”; “I have noticed...”; “This is what I am seeing...”; “Is everything okay?”; “Is there anything I can do?”

[Help mom and dad receive specialised care:](#) You are not the only person in this family's journey of healing. By using the information below, help families access professional support. As mentioned, families might not understand what they are going through, or are shamed that they are experiencing these things. As a carer, you can be alongside them to help them access these services.

**listening** – is so important! a listening ear can be extremely helpful!

### 3. What do we need to know or be aware of where mental health is an unspoken topic or stigmatised topic?

There is so much misinformation and misconceptions out there about mental health. Part of our work is educating and to give people the correct information. Just like we treat our physical health we need to do the same for our mental health. The one is just as important as the other. We wouldn't neglect our physical health – why are we not doing the same for our mental health? Often there are physical symptoms with mental health disorders.

Moms often do not want their partners to know that they are depressed or that they are taking medication because of the fear and shame of how they will be seen by others.

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“It is no one's fault! There is so much shame and guilt, but it is not mom's fault.”

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## useful links for information and referrals

- **The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)** is a useful website and you can send mom's name and telephone number on the online chat option for a counsellor to call mom for free. Or mom can **SMS 31393 or 32312** and a counsellor will call her back – available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Or mom can call the **SADAG Helplines 0800 212 223, 0800 708 090 or 0800 456 789** or the **Suicide Helpline 0800 567 567** which provides free telephonic counselling, information, referrals and resources 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. There is also a Facebook Page that has FREE online [#Facebook Expert Chats](#) daily, between 1pm – 2pm. Please be sure that mom agrees for you to give her number to SADAG.

- **Cipla Whatsapp Chat Line 076 882 2775** to chat online with a counsellor 7 days a week from 9am – 4pm.
- **Cape Mental Health** provide a range of community-based services for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. Services include assessment, referral, counselling and support.
- For more information, **here** is an interesting article about postnatal depression.
- **Perinatal Mental Health Project** (PMHP): has lots of information and resources
- **Postnatal Depression Support Association**
- **Useful contacts** resource has a range of agencies and services to refer mom or dad to, should you be concerned about her/him or baby.
- Video: **Caring for Mothers – The Perinatal Mental Health Project**
- Video: **Mental Health Support for New Mothers**

Adapted from:

<https://www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/postnatal-depression>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-natal-depression/symptoms/>