



MENTAL HEALTH DURING PREGNANCY & POST-BIRTH

How to care for families experiencing peri/postnatal depression or anxiety

LUNCHTIME CONVERSATION REFLECTION

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

Listen to audio recording [here](#)

Watch the video recording [here](#)

Philippians 4: 6-7

“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.”

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.

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. What is mental health during pregnancy and post-birth?

Mental health is referring to our emotional wellness and the ability for us to enjoy life. Perinatal mental health is referring to the period from conception - 1 year postnatally and the enjoyment of this period.

Women and girls are extremely vulnerable and are at risk of developing depression and anxiety (during pregnancy and postnatally) – referring to specific symptoms that have lasted for 2 – 4 weeks and are persistent and interfering with daily living. Symptoms include persistent low mood; loss of interest; no pleasure in doing things one previously enjoyed; thinking and behaviour is also altered, and one is not able to function optimally.

2. 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.

3. What have you seen during lockdown with regards to parents mental health

There has been an increase in the number of people experiencing anxiety and depression due to increase in food insecurity, job losses and overcrowded housing – adding stress to parents.

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

“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”.

Lunchtime Conversation chat box comment

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!

5. 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.

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

USEFUL LINKS FOR REFERRALS AND INFORMATION

It is very important to refer mom (or dad) to receive professional help. Here is a list of options to refer:

- **The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)**
<https://www.sadag.org/> is a useful website.
 - 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. Or
 - Mom can **SMS 31393 or 32312** and a counsellor will call her back – available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Or
 - There is also a **Facebook Page** that has FREE online [#Facebook Expert Chats](#) daily, between 1pm – 2pm. Or
 - You can send mom's name and telephone number on the **online chat option** for a counsellor to call mom for free.
 - Please be sure that mom agrees for you to give her number to SADAG.

- **Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP):** <https://pmhp.za.org/> Lots of information and resources
- **Postnatal Depression Support Association:** <https://www.pndsa.org.za/>
- **Cipla Whatsapp Chat Line 076 882 2775** to chat online with a counsellor 7 days a week from 9am – 4pm.
- **Cape Mental Health** <https://capementalhealth.co.za/> provide a range of community-based services for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. Services include assessment, referral, counselling, and support.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES TO SUPPORT MOM AND DAD

- Postnatal depression guide: [What is postnatal depression?](#) (PDF)
- [How do I support mom or dad's mental health?](#) Various resources in the Lockdown Toolkit <https://sikunye.org.za/lockdown-toolkit/>
- Video: [Caring for Mothers – The Perinatal Mental Health Project](#)
- Video: [Mental Health Support for New Mothers](#)
- Messages for Mothers: [Mental Health Podcast](#)