

Emotional wellbeing in and around childbirth



**Developed by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board
Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Service**

With thanks to the Community Psychology Team and Parent Infant Mental Health Service

This leaflet has been developed by the Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Service to help parents manage their wellbeing during their maternity stay in and around childbirth and start to build their bond with their baby.

Visiting restrictions have been changeable with the varying case rates of Covid-19. Maternity staff are here to support you in whatever way they can and we've created this leaflet to support them, and you, during your stay. Your community midwife will have the latest guidance for visiting.

This leaflet will offer a range of suggestions to manage the time when the birthing partner is not present, as well as ways to stay calm and manage difficult thoughts around pregnancy, childbirth and postnatally. It will also give some tips on ways to connect with your baby during those early hours and weeks.



Contents

Why look after your wellbeing?

C.A.L.M

Keeping **Connected**

Ask for what you want and need

Learn ways to keep calm

Manage your environment

After your baby has arrived

Top Tips and Further Reading and Resources

Why look after your wellbeing in and around childbirth?

Childbirth isn't something that most of us will have experience of. Although we may be really looking forward to meeting our new baby, this experience can be daunting as we do not fully know what to expect and know that it has the potential of being hard and painful. It is therefore understandable that most of us will feel at least a little worried about childbirth. If you have a child before you may be aware of the unpredictability of childbirth or be worried about how your experience will be different this time.

Fear of the unknown can leave us feeling anxious and worried. However, with the right support and the right strategies we can learn to manage our worries, soothe ourselves and stop the anxiety from taking over. This means that when we look back on the experience, we may remember that it was hard, but we also remember all the positives and that it is an amazing achievement.

Research tells us that Mums are more likely to report a positive birth experience, regardless of the nature of the birth, if they have felt confident and supported i.e., that they are able to soothe themselves and not become overwhelmed with anxiety.

Looking after your wellbeing also positively impacts on your baby and the people who matter to you, as you are more able to take good care of others and enjoy your time with them. It is therefore really important you find kindness and understanding for your situation and do things that will help you to stay as strong as you can be.

This leaflet will give you some ideas of how to look after your wellbeing in and around childbirth.

C.A.L.M

There are 4 important elements which can help you have a positive birth experience.

Keep **Connected** with the people who matter

Ask for what you want and need

Learn ways to manage thoughts and feelings

Manage your environment

Keep Connected

STAYING CONNECTED with your birth partner

It is really important for you and your birth partner to stay in frequent contact throughout your hospital stay. This helps you to feel supported and for them to develop their bond with your baby. If your partner is not able to be with you for the majority of your stay:

- Plan in advance how often you will speak, and how you will speak e.g. phone, video call.
- Your birth partner needs to be ready to go to the hospital as soon as you need them to.
- Get your birth partner to speak/read/sing to your bump/baby over phone/video call to help them build their bond with the baby. A calming familiar voice can also help to soothe your baby.
- Play pre-recorded videos/audio message from your partner to your bump/baby.

STAYING CONNECTED with other people who matter to you

You may find it helpful to keep in contact with other people who matter to you whilst you are in hospital. Make contact with friends/family who have a calming effect on you. Be honest with them about how you are feeling. This will help you feel looked after, listened to and safe:

- Keep in regular contact via text/phone/video call.
- Watch videos of favourite times with loved ones on your phone.
- Ask them to record a video message for you that you can play at any time when you need to feel connected to them.
- Imagine they are standing right beside you. Imagine what they might say and do to be helpful to you right now (see section on imagery for more ideas).

BUILDING YOUR CONNECTION with your baby- partner this means you too!

Use any quiet time you have to get to know your bump/baby. Here are some ideas:

- Bring your full attention to your bump's movements: what does it feel like, where do you feel it. What do you imagine he/she is like?
- Watch your baby with interest and wonder out loud what they might be thinking and feeling.
- Describe your baby using your senses (sight/touch/sound/smell). If your mind wanders off, bring it back to focusing on your baby.
- Talk/read/sing/move (e.g. rocking, walking)/stroke your baby.

Ask for what you want and need

Birth planning

It is important to have a plan for birth. However sometimes plans have to change. Although it is important to be flexible with your plan it is also important that you are involved in the decision making if plans need to change.

- You have a human right to be involved in the decisions that affect you and your baby.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. You may not understand the medical terms the maternity staff are using, or why certain decisions are being made – ask them to explain it clearly. It is important to understand what is being suggested regarding your care before you give your consent.
- It is important to involve your birth partner in your planning and decision making as they may be the one to ask questions or speak up for you when you are unable to do so for yourself.

Support in the hospital

- Ask for help. If help doesn't come immediately, be patient but do ask again.

Support at home: *'It takes a village to raise a child'* (African proverb)

- Ask for help and accept offers of help. You can't and shouldn't be trying to do everything yourself.
- Try to sleep or rest when the baby is sleeping.
- If you are worrying about chores being done, ask yourself 'do they need to be done right now?' or 'can someone else do them?'
- If you have a partner, balance out both of your needs for rest as well as the needs of your baby, other children and the household.
- Keep in regular touch with family and friends via phone, videos calls, etc. and be honest with them about how you are feeling.

Learn ways to stay calm: Mindfulness

An important part of preparing for childbirth is learning and practicing ways to stay calm and manage pain. The following section has a range of ideas you can learn and practice.

Keeping your body and mind in the present moment

Mindfulness is the practice of noticing thoughts, feelings and sensations without judgement and letting them go. By focusing on something in the present moment like our breathing it can help us stay calm and avoid worrying about the past and the future.

Exercise: **Rectangle breathing**. Focus on something rectangular e.g. pillow, computer, phone, window, door. With your eyes trace the shape around and as you do so breathe in slowly along the short side and breathe out slowly along the long side.

Exercise: **5,4,3,2,1 grounding**. Look for 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell and then take 1 deep breath in and take a long breath out.

Mindfulness to manage pain

Mindfulness practice can also help manage the sensations of pain in childbirth. Here are some 1-minute mindfulness practices you can use to manage pain during contractions (more examples and explanations can be found in the book *'Mindful Birthing'* by Nancy Bardacke). You can practice at home by holding an ice cube (to create a sensation of pain) for a minute whilst practicing each exercise. With each exercise, every time your mind wanders, gently bring it back to focus on the task. Decide which exercises work best for you and practice with your birth partner. Between each exercise, warm your hands up and do something kind for yourself e.g. using distraction/self soothe kit/rectangle breathing.

1. Bring your full awareness into the sensation of breathing.
2. Bring your awareness into the sensation of pain and describe it, noticing how the sensations change.
3. Count each breath e.g. 1 on an in breath, 2 on an out breath, 3 on an in breath etc.
4. Adopt a 'half smile' whilst breathing slowly in and out. Try to keep your lips (and even eyebrows up) whilst you breathe steadily in and out. This sends a signal to your brain which says 'I'm ok'.
5. Repeat a phrase over and over which helps you stay focused or calm e.g: 'in, out'; 'Safe, calm'; 'deep, slow'; 'I can do this'.

Learn ways to stay calm: using Imagery

We can create a sense of calm by imagining going to a place in our mind that makes us feel calm or imagine someone being by our side that will help us stay calm. Write the details of this place and person down and practice as much as you can. Use these ideas before trying to sleep and any time you are feeling worried.

- **Safe place:** Think of somewhere you have been to in your life where you have felt completely safe and calm or create somewhere brand new. This is a place just for you. Describe this place in as much detail to yourself using all your senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell). Close your eyes and take yourself there for about a minute breathing slowly and steadily whilst you do so. Ideas for safe place: beach/mountain/bedroom/garden.
- **Safe/Kind person:** Think of someone that you know/someone you know about/create someone new who represents safety, kindness and compassion. Describe this person to yourself in as many details as you can using all your senses. Close your eyes and imagine being with this person: what would they say to you right now, how would they say it, what does it feel like being with them. Imagine what this person would say to help you find kindness for yourself and your situation.
- **Remembering a time when you have coped well:** Remember a time when you have coped well with a difficulty. Think about this time in detail: how did you overcome this difficulty; what and how did you say/do; how did it feel to cope well; where in your body can you feel this strength? Now imagine that you can use this same strength again to cope with any difficulties right now.



Learn ways to stay calm: Managing difficult thoughts and feelings

Letting go of difficult thoughts

Our minds have a tendency to focus on the negative even when this is not helpful to do so. Try the following to help your mind let go of difficult thoughts rather than get stuck on them.

- Say to yourself: 'I notice, I'm having the thought that.....'.
- Imagine that you are by a stream. Imagine placing each thought on a leaf and watching the leaf flow down the stream (the meditation 'leaves on a stream' is available on YouTube).
- Avoid comparing yourself to others. You are doing your very best.

Skills to manage very strong emotions

TIPP

- Tip the **TEMPERATURE** of your face/body – anxiety and worry can cause you to heat up. Cool yourself down by drinking cold water/running wrists under a tap/splashing face with cold water/cold shower/getting fresh air.
- **INTENSELY** focus on movement e.g. – yoga (there are excellent videos on YouTube), walking (around the house/garden/ward/street), stretching.
- **PACED** breathing- breathe in slowly for the count of 2 and breathe out slowly for the count of 3
- **PAIRED** muscle relaxation- deliberately tense and then relax one muscle at a time, starting at your head and finishing at your toes (guided muscle relaxation is also available on YouTube).

STOP

STOP!!! – Freeze! Don't move a muscle!

Take a step back – Mentally and physically. Take some deep breaths.

Observe – Press the pause button – Look around – Who else is involved? What am I thinking? What am I reacting to? What am I feeling in my body?

Proceed mindfully – What do I want from the situation? What are my goals? What is the wise thing to do?



Manage your environment

Bring things from home that can help you to feel comfortable, safe and keep your mind distracted away from any worrying thoughts or feelings.

COMFORTABLE

What can you bring to hospital to make sure you feel comfortable?

Ideas: Pillow, blanket, favourite pajamas, birthing ball, clothes to give birth in e.g. tank top

SAFE: Create a 'self-soothe' kit

Get together items in your hospital bag or on your phone which help you to feel safe and calm. With each item, try to keep your focus on that item and the calm feelings it brings.

Ideas:

- **Sight:** photos/videos/pictures/cards
- **Sound:** music/podcasts/audio books/video messages
- **Taste:** chocolate/sweets/warm drink/crisps
- **Touch:** item of a loved one/the baby's clothes/soft toy/blanket/pillow/moisturiser/heat pack/massage balls
- **Smell:** perfume/shower gel/bubble bath/clothing item of a loved one

DISTRACTION: through activity (ones in bold can be done at home and in hospital). Write a list of all the things you could do to keep your mind busy and have a choice of activities packed in your hospital bag. Ideas:

- **Self Care:** bath, **shower, paint nails, face mask, clean teeth, treats**
- **Leisure:** **reading, audiobooks, box sets, puzzle books, video games**
- **Social:** **text, call, walk the dog, support groups**
- **Physical:** **walk, stretching, exercise ball, yoga**
- **Organise:** tidy, organize files, set routines, plan meals/snacks
- **Creative:** **colouring, knitting, sewing, writing, painting, cooking**

My Hospital Bag checklist

For me:

- Maternity Notes
- Birth plan
- A loose, comfortable outfit for labour
- Things to keep you occupied and calm (see soothe or distract suggestions)
- Snacks and drinks
- A handheld fan
- A phone and charger
- Pregnancy pillow
- A TENS machine, heatpack or massage balls
- A wash bag- hairbrush, hair ties, toothbrush, toothpaste, shower gel, lip balm, shampoo
- A birthing ball (if your hospital doesn't provide them)
- Large, comfy knickers
- Large sanitary or maternity pads
- Pyjamas or nightie (think about whether you will need access for breastfeeding)
- Slippers, flip flops or fluffy socks
- A comfy outfit to wear home, something with a loose or high waistband in case of C-section
- Dressing gown
- Nursing bras and breastpads (if planning to breastfeed)

For baby:

- Vests and sleepsuits in newborn size (if baby is suspected to be small or arrive early pack some tiny baby size)
- First size nappies
- A hat, scratch mittens, socks
- A blanket
- Muslin squares or bibs
- An outfit to go home in

You might find it helpful to separate the clothes for your baby into separate Ziploc bags, labelled by size. You could also label what you want them to wear as 'first outfit' and 'going home outfit' just in case you need to rely on someone else to get your things out of your bag for you.

Managing your environment at home

Here are just some tips for managing your home environment before and after the birth of your baby.

- If using an isofix base fit it in your car a few weeks before you due date and practice putting your car seat in and out
- Think about where things will happen at home- plan where you'll do nappy changes and think about what you'll need to hand.
- If you're expecting to have a C-section think about where you can place things that will be easily within your reach.
- Think about where baby will sleep for naps, it might not be feasible to be walking up and down the stairs multiple times a day so you might want to consider a crib or basket in the lounge.
- Batch cooking- make up some meals ahead of time that you can store in the freezer and reheat easily.
- If breast feeding and planning to express familiarise yourself with your breast pump.
- If bottle feeding, set up and read the instructions for your sterilizer.
- If visitors are permitted within the guidelines, think about what you will feel comfortable with, maybe set up a visiting window and visitor free days.

Top tips:

- Plan ahead for your stay in hospital.
 - What do you need to bring with you to help you to stay calm?
 - How are you going to stay connected to the people that matter to you?
 - Try the exercises in this leaflet and decide which work best for you and tell your birth partner and maternity team so they can remind you to use the exercises.
- Ask for what you want and need around childbirth but be flexible with your plan. Make sure your birth partner speaks up for you when you can't.
- Bring understanding and kindness to yourself and your situation.
- Ask for and accept offers of help.
- Make the most of the quiet time with your baby to get to know each other and build your bond.



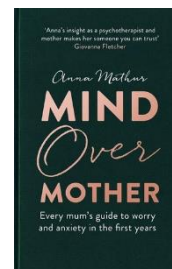
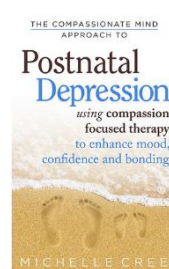
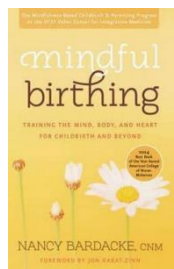
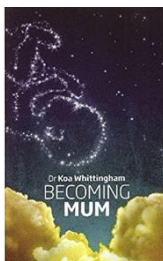
My CALM Plan

You can use this plan to list all the things that will help you to stay CALM, and things you may need during your time in hospital, to make it as comfortable as possible.

Staying Connected	<i>What are we going to do to stay connected to each other and family/friends?</i>
Ask	<i>What questions may we need to ask? What help may we need?</i>
Learn	<i>What strategies are we going to use or find helpful?</i>
Manage Your Environment	<i>What can I take in with me to make me feel more comfortable?</i>

Reading and resources:

- For more details on the skills described and other techniques please see: The Perinatal toolkit: <http://howis.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/866/COVID-perinatal%20toolkit%20e-mail%20version%20%28final%20draft%29.pdf>
- Books:
 - o 'Becoming Mum' by Koa Whittingham
 - o 'Mindful Birthing' by Nancy Bardacke
 - o 'Compassionate Mind Approach to Postnatal Depression' by Michelle Cree
 - o 'Mind Over Mother' by Anna Mathur



- Mindfulness Apps:
 - o Headspace
 - o Calm
 - o Mind the bump
- Royal College of Psychiatry Perinatal mental health and covid 19 reading and resources <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/treatments-and-wellbeing/perinatal-care-and-covid-19>
- Read the following blog for ideas of ways to get through lockdown with a baby <https://weneedtotalkaboutchildrensmentalhealth.wordpress.com/2021/01/16/3-and-getting-through-lockdown-with-a-baby/>

