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Women & Childbirth

The emotional aspects



What should I be feeling?

Because we think of having a baby as a happy event, a lot of women expect to feel content and fulfilled once their baby is born. Bringing a new little person into the world can be exciting, but there are lots of reasons why it can be stressful.

This leaflet aims to explain some of the stress and makes some suggestions about reducing it.

The first week

The first week after your baby is born comes as a reality shock for most parents. Up to this point, particularly with first babies, a lot of attention will have been focused on the pregnancy and preparing for labour.

Suddenly, the baby is there as a real separate person and you have to do something with it. Older children often ask “do we have to take it home Mummy?” Privately, their parents may be wondering the same thing.

It can seem like a terrifying responsibility to be left on your own with your baby for the first time. Fortunately, although they don't come with an instruction manual, babies are designed to help you learn to look after them. Your

Adapting to having a new member of the family is a major demand on everyone's personal resources. Try to make the rest of your life as easy and straightforward as possible

- Remember the essentials. People need to be fed, loved and kept warm – that goes for you as well as the baby. Anything else is an optional extra
- You may be surprised or even shocked at the way you feel sometimes. However, it's very unlikely that other people will be. Lots of women have mixed or negative feelings about themselves or their baby. You may want to confide in a close friend, or your Health Visitor could put you in touch with people who've had lots of practice in talking to mums who feel this way



Self doubt

We hope it has become obvious from reading this leaflet that there will probably be times when you feel physically, emotionally or practically unable to meet the tasks of motherhood. Anyone who takes on a new project in their lives has moments when they wonder if they've done the right thing. Even women who already have other children will find that the new baby has its own characteristics and to some extent they have to learn how to care for it all over again. Try not to be too hard on yourself.

If you are really frightened about your ability to cope or the way you feel, it probably won't help to try to pretend that everything is ok. Pick someone you can trust and let them know.

Key tips

- Sleep is important. It has a major impact on how you feel and your ability to cope
 - If you've always been a loner, learn and practice how to ask for and accept help
 - A new baby won't change old family dynamics. Rely on those people who have a history of being genuinely caring towards you
- baby will keep on letting you know when it's not happy until it gets what it needs.

Your body – your mind

Your body will also be undergoing massive physical changes in the week following birth.

Firstly, you'll have lost the placenta and all the high levels of pregnancy hormones that keep you calm and make you bloom while you are pregnant. Secondly, your body has to get into milk production.

Not everyone's experience is the same, but it is generally accepted that women will feel a bit moody and weepy in the first week. This should pass quite quickly, so if you feel this way after a couple of weeks, there may be other factors affecting the way you feel.



Things that can affect the way you feel

Adapting to change

It has been clearly shown by research that all change, even change for the better, is stressful. The bigger the change, the greater the stress.

This is because when part of your life changes, you cannot just run through your normal routines on automatic pilot. There is the effort of learning a new routine and uncertainty while you get used to the change.

Having a new baby creates a lot of change in the life of the whole family:-

- The family routine has to be adapted to include the new baby
- Each person in the family has to work out a relationship with the baby
- There may be changes to the family's finances and to your working hours
- Adapting to the role of a new parent can also have quite an impact on the relationship between the couple

With all these changes going on, it is a good idea to avoid any other changes if you can. This is not a good time for either partner to change job or move house.

Feeling like you are losing control

There is a difference between thinking about hurting your baby and losing control. When people truly lose control, things don't seem very real and they can do things they later regret. A true loss of control normally only lasts about a minute.

If you think you are losing control

- Put the baby in a safe place like the cot and walk away. You will probably come back down to earth in a few seconds. All danger will have past but you will most likely feel very shaky and frightened
- It may be useful to get out of the house for a while and / or to have some company (but remember, you must never leave a baby or child in the house on their own)
- Momentary losses of control are an important sign that you are under a lot of stress. When you have calmed down, give some thought to what sort of help you need and who would be a good person to ask for help

common ones is imagining throwing the baby down the stairs.

Having aggressive or hateful thoughts about the baby is a sign that you are under stress and could do with a bit of support. One way of getting support is to tell other people how you are feeling. You could also consider whether you have been expecting an unreasonable amount from yourself.



It can be tricky to balance everyone's needs in the family. New babies demand and need a lot of attention. If all the energy and attention is focused on the baby, you and the rest of the family may end up feeling miserable, resentful and neglected. Try to work out an arrangement within the household so that everyone has some time in the day that is just for their enjoyment. Even half an hour watching your favourite T.V programme can be a valuable break.

Sleep

It is very likely that your night's sleep will be disturbed by the baby for some months. Even if you manage to get the same number of hours sleep overall, having your normal sleep pattern broken will make you feel tired.

Having too little sleep or very broken sleep is known as sleep deprivation. Indeed, sleep deprivation has been used as a real instrument of torture all over the world. Nearly all new parents suffer from sleep deprivation to some degree.

This makes people:-

- Moody
- Irritable
- Less able to cope with minor problems
- More likely to get into arguments over silly things and feel that everyday chores are getting on top of them

Try not to take upsets personally. Things are bound to get strained from time to time.



During the first few months, try to make life as easy for yourself as possible. Accept any offers of help that come your way and try to be flexible.

People who are exhausted very quickly get to the end of their tether. However, it only takes one good sleep to recharge the batteries. If you are going through a rough patch with the baby not sleeping much, make whatever arrangements you can to take it in turns so that everyone gets some sleep at some point.

Loneliness

When you have a new baby, you may find your house becomes filled with a steady stream of visitors. On the other hand, you may find that you don't see many adults

However, nobody instinctively knows why their baby is crying or what to do about it. Breastfeeding, sterilising bottles, changing nappies, putting on babygrows are all skills and routines that have to be learnt.

Both you and the baby may get quite frustrated until you get used to doing things better.

Sometimes it may be helpful to pick up a few tips from other people on how they've managed. At other times, you may find you're getting so much advice that you're completely overwhelmed by it. Use your own judgement to decide whether the advice is helpful or is making you anxious.

Hating the baby

Given some of the stresses and strains described in this leaflet, you probably won't be surprised if you're a bit grumpy now and then. However, it comes as a shock when you find yourself hating the baby and / or having violent thoughts about your baby.

Some women find these thoughts very frightening. You may be frightened to tell anyone because you think your baby will be taken away.

In fact, it is very common for women to have violent and hateful thoughts about their babies. These thoughts can come in all shapes and sizes, although one of the most

Your own and other people's expectations of you must allow for your need to heal. As we live in an advanced, industrialised society, take advantage of what you can. If you are in pain or discomfort, you could check with your doctor whether modern medicine has anything to offer. For instance, a physiotherapist may be able to help with sore stitches.



Learning new skills

Women are often taught to expect that they will instinctively know how to be mothers because it's natural.

There are some instincts that become apparent at birth. Babies are born knowing how to suck (but not how to get the nipple or teat into their mouth). Lots of mums find that they become very sensitive to their baby's crying and automatically respond to it.

during the day and you get a bit lonely, especially if most of your social contact was through work or college etc.

At the beginning of their lives, babies need a lot but are unable to give much back in relationships. It is important to have contact with other people who can laugh and talk with you and understand your point of view. There are lots of organisations to help mums get in contact with each other. You can contact Meet a Mum Association on: 0208 768 0123 or speak to your Health Visitor who will know what's available in your area.

If you get different advice from different people, you may want to decide just to listen to one person whose opinion you can trust.

Remembering old skills

People sometimes assume that women who already have a child will know exactly what to do with a new baby. Of course, the experience you've had before will help with things. But each new baby brings a period of emotional upheaval and readjustment. If you've got older children running about the place, you may need support to find time to talk to the older ones about the new baby and to get some rest yourself.

Worries about the baby

New babies can seem very small and vulnerable, although often they are surprisingly resilient. If you are worried, talk to someone you trust, a friend or relative perhaps. Even if it turns out to be nothing, you will be much more relaxed if you ask someone. Also, your midwife, doctor or Health Visitor are all trained to be able to spot if your baby has a problem. Notice who takes your fears seriously and who gives you a proper answer – you will be more reassured if you get support and advice from people who are sympathetic to you.

Family issues

Becoming a parent can throw up all sorts of issues from past and present relationships:-

- If there are already tensions between you and your partner, then the additional strain of a new baby may bring these to the fore
- If you have always felt let down by your parents, then you may feel additional anger and disappointment that they do not support you with your new baby
- If your mother has died, then becoming a mother yourself can rekindle the pain of that loss and leave you feeling very sad that you can't share the baby with her
- If you have been abused, then pain and fear that you may experience during labour can bring memories of that abuse flooding back

You are bound to be emotionally vulnerable after the birth of a baby. It may help to get some of these feelings off your chest. Some of the issues mentioned may be long term problems and you may want to seek counselling when you are ready, either through a voluntary organisation or through the health service. Your doctor or Health Visitor could advise you on what's available.

What's important in the first few months is to avoid additional distress when possible and get whatever emotional support you can. If there are people you know who help you feel relaxed and care about you, then they are good people to have around.

Use your own judgement to decide who are good people to turn to.

Physical Health

Pregnancy, breastfeeding and lack of sleep are all physically demanding. If you've also become anaemic or got stitches or other aches and pains, your body will be working flat out and using a lot of energy to try to repair itself.

In many cultures it was traditional for women to be confined to bed for periods of up to 40 days following childbirth in order to rest and recover while friends and family did all the chores and brought them meals.

Although it may not be possible for you to stay in bed (and you may not want to) it can be helpful to think of this as a period of convalescence.