



PART FIVE

For Partners, Family, and Friends

If you are the woman's partner, a family member, friend, or part of the community that supports a pregnant woman, you may want to know how to help her during pregnancy, labour, childbirth, and during the early months of being a parent. This part of the resource is especially for you. It includes ideas for talking to a mother who may be hurting and might need help.

What partners, family, and friends can do to help

If you are a partner

Unlike pregnant women, partners do not go through all the physical changes of pregnancy and giving birth. They may not begin to adjust to being a parent until the baby is born.

Becoming a parent is an important time in anyone's life. Some people believe that a baby will enhance their relationship with their partner and family – and sometimes it does! But just like the reality of motherhood may be different from what a woman expects, being a parent can be different, too. Almost everyone notices that a new baby brings some extra stress to life.

New parents may see their partner as being focused on the needs of the baby, rather than on them as a partner. They may not be sure about how to be more involved or how to help their partner. They may find it hard to juggle work and new family demands. Partners can sometimes feel they have very little time to do what they enjoy.

The pressure on partners to be strong and able to solve problems themselves can make it hard for

"It is okay to talk to someone you can trust. It is a sign of strength"

them to share their feelings and get the support they need. It can also make it difficult for them to give their partner the support she needs.

Partners need to find support for themselves. They can do this by talking to other parents, going to parents' groups, seeking healing gatherings, or going for individual counselling, if needed.

Mothers who have the blues should be allowed to cry if they want to. Make it OK for her to express her feelings and emotions. A new mother can benefit from someone who just listens to her and comforts her with respect to her worries and anxieties – assuring her they care and will be there for her in her health seeking journey.

Having the support of a partner can be very helpful for a woman who is depressed during pregnancy or after giving birth. Both partners might need to learn to accept offers of help from friends or family. They may need to arrange for someone to help with meals, housework, and other children.



CIRCLE OF LIFE Support that a Partner Can Offer

Spiritual

- Support yourself—Find someone you can talk to in an honest way about your feelings and how your partner's depression or anxiety affects you. This may be an Elder, family member, friend or a counselor. Postpartum depression takes a long time to heal. Do not expect too much too soon. Remind her that you love her and are there for her. Plan to spend some time together as a couple doing something you both enjoy.

Mental

- Plan for the long term—Be aware that your partner may continue to be moody, upset, or angry, even after treatment starts. Healing will happen in its own time.
- Get help if you need it—Some partners may also fall into depression. You may need to seek support from your family, friends, and the community. Look into healing that involves traditional as well as Western ways (see Part Five of this resource.)

Emotional

- Communicate—Let your partner know what you are thinking and feeling. If you bottle up your feelings, the chances are higher that they will come out later, maybe during an argument. Try not to blame each other. Respect each other's views and feelings.
- Stand back a bit—Do not always feel you need to solve all your partner's problems. Sometimes just listening to what she has to say is enough.

Physical

- Try to understand your partner's needs— Support and encourage her to seek help if she needs help. Go with her if she asks when she gets help.
- Reassure and encourage her - Telling your partner she is doing a good job from time-to-time can make a big difference.
- Care for yourself—Seek professional help for yourself if you feel you are not coping or may be at risk of depression and anxiety.
- Lend a hand—Get involved in some of the day-to-day tasks of caring for your new baby. Because there is so much to do, ask her what else you can do to help.
- Take care of your own health and well-being— Make sure you exercise, relax, and set aside time for yourself. If you are worried about leaving your partner alone, ask a friend or relative to stay with her while you go out.
- Be patient about sex—Many women have a low interest in sex after childbirth. This is also true for women feeling postpartum depression. Do not assume that your partner is not attracted to you anymore. During this time, showing that you care and being loving without pressuring her for sex can help.

Family members and friends

Family members and friends need to be aware that pregnant women and new mothers need comfort and support. This is most especially true if they experience baby blues or have symptoms of depression or anxiety. Here are some suggestions.

"There were times when my friend "D" would come over and just sit. She didn't expect anything from me and never took my rants personally. She would sometimes just pull out the Scrabble board and wait until I was ready. And there were times when she pulled my head into her lap and stroked my hair as I cried. —YCW

"I moved back into my mother's house after my marriage break-up, while I was pregnant. —FM



CIRCLE OF LIFE Support that Family Members and Friends Can Offer

Spiritual

- Spend time listening, just be in the moment with her without needing to offer solutions and advice.
- Encourage her to get more help (from a traditional healer or western professional), if needed. See Part Five of this booklet for more details.

Mental

- Learn as much as you can about baby blues and depression in pregnancy and postpartum periods.
- Be aware that these conditions are temporary. With help and support, the mother will feel more stable and cared for. Be patient, knowing that it may take time before she regains her health.
- Control your urge to give advice on how to parent, unless she asks you for advice.

Emotional

- Help the depressed mother seek treatment for her depression.
- Remind her that she will get better. You can support her by giving the clear message that depression is not a sign of weakness.

Physical

- Offer to look after the baby or older children. If she says “no” discuss other childcare options.
- Offer to help with cooking and cleaning. Make it clear that you are not “taking over” and that you do not expect anything in return.

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- Encourage the mother to take care of herself by eating well, doing regular exercise, and limiting any drug or alcohol use.

Letting a woman know that you think she might need help

It is not always easy to know how to help someone who is in depression. You may not know what to say or do. We all respond to what is happening in different ways. We may think and talk about the same event differently. The following tips may help you approach a friend or family member.

Difficult conversations

Sometimes, when people are feeling depressed, they find it awkward to discuss their thoughts and feelings in an open way. They may even feel angry if they are asked if they are okay. These tips may help you during a difficult conversation:

- Stay calm
- Be firm, fair, and steady
- If you are wrong, admit it
- Do not lose control

Taking the first step

Taking that first step towards helping a person who seems to be in need requires some thought and care. Choose a time and place that works for both of you. You may want to start the conversation with words like these:

- I love and care about you and I am feeling really concerned about the ways that you have been acting, setting yourself apart, etc.

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- I wonder if there is anything going on with you...
 - I want you to know I am here to listen if you need to talk...

You will notice that all these sentences begin with the word "I," not with the word "You." It's best to start your sentences this way. When you begin a sentence with the word "you," the person may feel you are blaming them.

Listen more than you talk

Sometimes, when a person you care about wants to talk, they are not seeking advice, but just need to talk about some of their concerns. If you can listen rather than talk, you may be able to really understand how someone feels. You may want to wait until a later discussion to give the person any suggestions or advice. During this first talk, just offer neutral comments such as, "I can see how that would bother you."

Be aware of body language

Body language is very important in helping the person you care about to feel more comfortable. To show you are listening, follow the other person's lead about eye contact and sit in a relaxed position. Creating a safe place to talk is important. So consider if the woman would prefer indirect conversation (while doing dishes, for example) rather than being face-to-face.

Use open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are ones that someone can only answer by "telling a story."

The opposite of open-ended is closed. Closed questions can only be answered with YES or NO. It is best to ask open-ended questions if you want to hear someone's true feelings.

Closed and open questions		
Closed question:	Did you feel better today?	The only answer someone can give is YES or NO.
Open-ended questions:	How did you feel today? OR Tell me about your day. OR What was good, what was difficult for you today?	The person who answers these questions has a chance to "tell their story."

More closed and open questions		
Closed question:	Did the baby have a nap today?	The only answer someone can give is YES or NO.
Open-ended questions:	How did the baby sleep today? OR Tell me about your day. OR What happened at naptime today?	The person who answers these questions has a chance to "tell their story."

Some open-ended questions you can ask when talking to a family member or friend are

- So, tell me about..? or
- What's worrying you...?

Spend time together

Often, just taking the time to talk to or be with the person lets them know you care and can help you understand what they are going through.

" Helping someone with depression is not beyond you. "
—HY

