

WHEN YOUR PARTNER IS DEPRESSED

"I came home early after she called me sounding pretty dreadful. Shelly had done some of the washing but the lounge room was a mess, even though I had cleaned it up and put things away before I went to work. The main thing seemed to be going shopping. She couldn't get it organised. 'Hey,' I said, 'we can do this. We can go if you like.' I got Leon's change bag and put him into the capsule and Shelly came out and got into the car. We backed down the drive and looked around and Shelly was crying, saying: 'You can do it. Everyone else can do it except me, it's just me that's hopeless.' We didn't go."

Postnatal depression (PND) can be a real curve ball for a couple already having to adjust to big changes brought by a baby. The good news is that PND is treatable and that the chances of a full recovery are good. The first step is recognising what's really happening. In time, with your support and the help of others, your partner will find her feet again.

WHAT YOU MIGHT NOTICE

Trust your instincts if you become concerned about your partner's wellbeing or her ability to look after your child. You might notice:

- you're finding it more difficult to leave your partner and go to work each day
- you often need to leave work early to help out at home
- your partner has severe mood swings, or her behaviour seems odd
- your partner has lost interest in sex.

Other signs that your partner may be experiencing PND include:

- talk of harming herself or the baby
- bizarre thoughts or speech patterns
- risk-taking behaviour
- withdrawing from all social contact
- becoming obsessed with morbid ideas
- statements showing very low self-esteem, such as "You'd be better off without me"
- signs of extreme despair.

MAKING TOUGH DECISIONS

Taking signs of depression seriously sometimes means making some tough decisions. For example, deciding to take time away from work – not just an afternoon or a few days but perhaps weeks or months. The decision to seek professional help is another. Women with PND are often unwilling or unable to tell others how they feel or to ask for help.

HELPING HER GET HELP

There are a number of ways to treat PND, from medication to effective support groups for depressed mothers.

- Learn more about PND and its treatment.
- Help her get the support she needs – counselling, support groups or involving friends and family.
- Make sure your partner has a proper medical assessment and is regularly monitored.
- If your partner is taking medication, be supportive and encourage her to take it as prescribed.
- Although it might be upsetting if your partner is hospitalised or admitted to a mother-baby unit for her PND, be assured that she will be receiving appropriate and necessary treatment.

Effect on your children

If your partner is depressed, it affects everyone in the family. In this situation, your connection with your children is as important as ever as you can provide much needed care and positive attention.

HELPING HER COPE

- Don't worry if you feel that you don't know what to say. It is a difficult time for you both and you will learn the best way to deal with it together.
- Encourage her to express her feelings. Don't just try to fix things or offer solutions.
- Don't be discouraged if she seems withdrawn – there will be other times when she'll respond and be able to express gratitude for your support.
- Encourage and support her. Knowing that you are okay with whatever she can manage is important.
- At all times reassure her about her relationship with your baby.

- Try to avoid making any major decisions, such as buying a house, while your partner has PND.
- Tell her that you will stand by her and not tire of supporting her through the illness.
- Try to reassure your partner that you are okay if she is not interested in sex for the time being. Touching or cuddling may be more comfortable at this time, without leading to sex. It's important that you both communicate what you want and how you feel.
- Try to help out as much as you can with household tasks and child care.

Look after yourself too

- Try to stay positive.
- You don't have to do everything yourself.
- Accept any offers of help from family members or friends.
- Tune into "the depression is talking". If your partner's comments or tone sound unduly critical, think about them as "the depression talking and step away."
- Remember your own wellbeing – make sure that you have someone you can talk to and get as much rest as you can.
- Recognise the good you are doing.
- Remember that your partner will recover with the appropriate help

