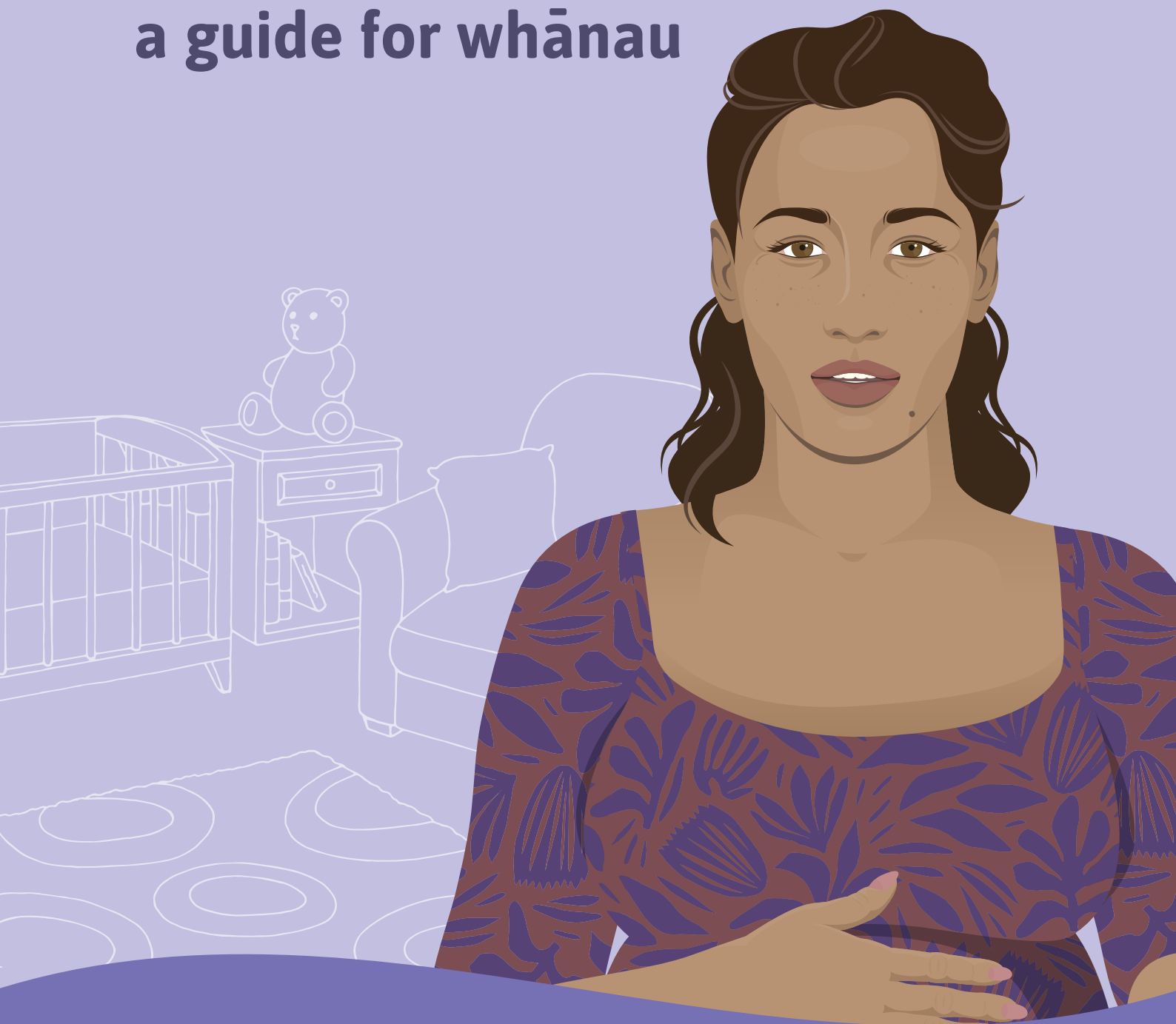


Understanding perinatal distress

a guide for whānau



Understanding perinatal distress – a guide for whānau

Haere mai, welcome. It's great that you're taking the time to learn how to support your loved one.

This resource is here to try and help you understand some of the challenges mums can have with low mood and anxiety during pregnancy and after childbirth. It might help to go through this guide with your loved one so they can help you understand what information applies to their struggles and is helpful, and what isn't.



Having a new baby can be a wonderful and exciting time for whānau; however, it can also be a very stressful and emotional experience too.

Due to a range of factors, which we will cover below, women are more likely to experience anxiety and low moods that can lead to depression during pregnancy and after giving birth. The good news is feelings of anxiety and low mood can improve and there's lots of things women can do to help themselves get into a better space – and there's lots of helpful things you can do to help too!

Our courses are designed to provide really effective support for low mood and anxiety and are proven to work – so please encourage your loved one to work through their course.

You can also find a range of helplines, services, and advice on how to support your loved one on the Mental Health Foundation website: <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/help/supporting-others>

What can cause low mood and anxiety during pregnancy and after birth?

Below are a range of factors that can impact women's moods and state of mental wellbeing during pregnancy and after childbirth. Many of these factors get better with time; however, some require more care, attention, and specialist support. It may help to talk with your loved one about which they see may apply to the issues they are having and what help they may need from you or others.

Stress

Major life events and changes can impact our moods. Having a baby is a major life change to adjust to (even if this isn't your first), and women and their partners may have had a long and difficult road getting pregnant.

Early experiences

Early trauma, loss, and challenges in childhood, particularly within relationships with caregivers, can continue to impact us over time. Becoming a parent can 'lift up' some of these experiences.

Birth and pregnancy trauma

Trauma in childbirth or pregnancy can trigger a lot of anxiety and stress and carry an ongoing sense of loss and grief that can impact moods.

Hormones

During pregnancy women experience a flood of oestrogen and progesterone (pregnancy hormones), and these hormones change again after childbirth.

In the early days after birth, women experience a drop in the two major pregnancy hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. Oestrogen impacts the area of the brain that controls mood – so it's no surprise that a drop in this hormone is associated with anxiety, irritability, and feeling low.

Fatigue and sleep deprivation

The word 'tired' is an understatement for how women (and their partners) often feel after giving birth and in the early months of their baby's life. Fatigue can be wearing on the body and mind, impacting moods and the way we think and see things.

Did you know?

1 in 10 women will experience anxiety and depression during pregnancy, and 1 in 7 women will experience these symptoms after childbirth.



Isn't it just the 'baby blues'?

The 'baby blues' usually occur a few days after giving birth. Symptoms of the 'baby blues' include being overly sensitive or tearful, moody, anxious, or irritable. The 'baby blues' generally lift within a week; however, if your partner or loved one's low mood continues to persist after a few weeks, then this can be a sign of postnatal depression.

How do you tell if it's postnatal vs. the stress of being a new parent?

1. Do you or your loved one feel low for most of the day or more often than not? Has it been like this for more than two weeks?
2. Do you or your loved one experience anxiety (feeling tense, nervous, worried, on edge) most of the time?
3. Do you or your loved one experience anxiety and tension even when you're not in a stressful situation?

Answering yes to these questions may be a sign that you are experiencing anxiety and low mood, or your partner may be experiencing postnatal anxiety and depression.

If you are unsure or concerned about how you're feeling, please talk to your Plunket nurse, or someone in your healthcare team.



What is depression?

Depression is a common term used to describe a feeling of significant sadness or low mood. The term 'depression' is used by health professionals to describe a low state of wellbeing someone might be in, where they have felt low in mood, most days of the week for at least two weeks. When someone is experiencing depression, they may have a range of feelings, physical symptoms in their body, and changes in how they think and behave that include

- feeling sad, numb, or low most of the time
- losing interest, or finding it hard to enjoy things they used to
- feeling physically tired and low in energy, or restless and unable to relax
- feeling guilty or hopeless
- lacking confidence and being self-critical
- getting irritable and having less patience
- worrying more that things might go wrong
- being more sensitive, or appearing distant and shut off
- isolating from others or avoiding places or activities
- struggling to sleep, or sleeping more than usual

If your loved one (or yourself) has been experiencing depression with a lot of the experiences above for more than two weeks, it's important to talk to your trusted healthcare professional to see what help and support are available. Sometimes all that is needed is time, love, and getting back to important activities that make the difference, and other times talking to a counsellor or therapist or trying medication helps people get their wellbeing and sense of self back on track.

It's not uncommon for people experiencing low mood to feel that life is just too hard and that they're a burden to others. Sometimes these thoughts and ongoing low moods can lead to thoughts of self harm. Thinking about self harm, however, doesn't mean people are serious about wanting to hurt themselves, or will make an attempt to take their life, but it is a cause for concern and communicates they require specialist help. It's important to be courageous enough to ask people in our lives who are struggling with low moods whether they are having, or have had thoughts of suicide, as it may be too difficult for them to disclose on their own. If your loved one has had, or is having thoughts of suicide, it's important to make a plan together to get help from a professional and ensure their safety.

In an emergency, you can call 111 or take a loved one you're concerned about into A&E and ask for help. The Mental Health Foundation has a list of services you can contact in an emergency at: <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/help>

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal human emotion, just like many of the other emotions we feel day-to-day, such as anger, sadness, happiness, and frustration. It's completely normal to feel anxious about a challenging or new situation. Anxiety can be a really helpful emotion, ensuring we are prepared for the future, or helping us take action when we need to.

When we feel anxious, we tend to worry about things that could go wrong in the future and how we might cope if they did. Anxiety changes the way we think, focusing our minds on potential danger, so we can weigh up the risks and try and choose behaviours to help us 'stay safe'. This might mean acting in a way that protects our physical safety or others, or a job, relationship, or something else that is valuable to us.



Anxiety isn't an issue unless it begins to cause problems with our ability to function and enjoy life. Anxiety usually starts to become a problem when it

- is difficult to control
- starts to impact on lots of different situations

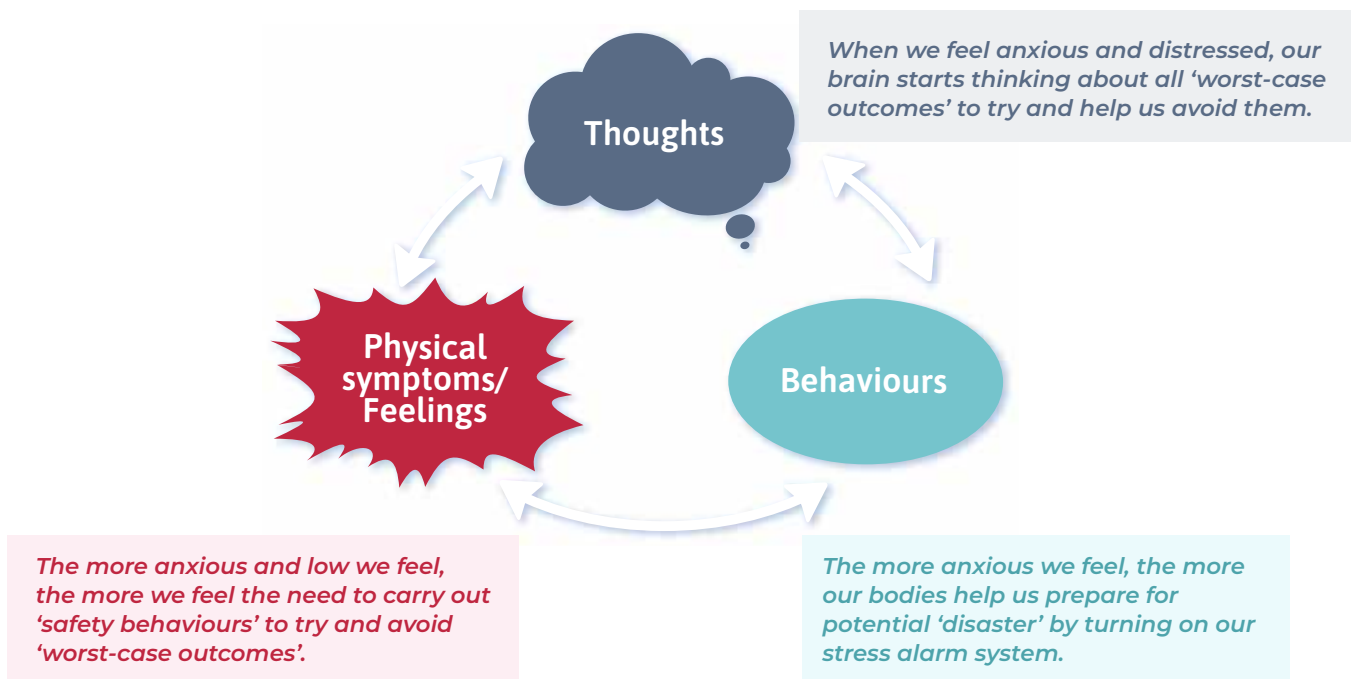
- starts to impact your body and health more and more
- makes day-to-day life feel challenging, and
- sticks around for a long time.

When anxiety becomes a problem, people might experience

- racing, anxious thoughts about horrible things happening in the future
- anxious thoughts or images that keep coming back
- feelings of tension in their body, a racing heart, sweating, or finding it hard to breathe
- panic attacks or feelings of panic
- difficulty relaxing and/or sleeping.

Getting stuck in a cycle of anxiety and low mood

We can get stuck in a cycle of anxiety and low mood when we're experiencing challenges due to the way our thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms, and behaviours interact with each other.



We all get stuck in cycles of low mood, anxiety, anger, or other distressing emotions from time to time over life. The good news is we can get out of these cycles by challenging the way we think and choosing behaviours that help us feel better and more confident. One of the best approaches for this is a therapy called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

CBT for low mood and anxiety

- CBT is proven to be one of the most effective ways to improve mental wellbeing.
- CBT helps people understand how their thoughts (cognitions) and behaviours (what they do and how they act) affect how they feel.
- CBT helps people to break down the cycle of distress they are stuck in by teaching specific skills to address each factor. Some skills focus on reducing physical symptoms (like tension, restlessness, and heart palpitations), while others work to help people change unhelpful behaviours and thinking patterns that keep low mood and anxiety going.

Helping your loved one

There are lots of things you can do to help your loved one as they work through their Just a Thought course.

Ask the person how you can support them

Find out if, and how, they'd like you to be involved. The person may find it helpful to talk to you about their concerns or they may not. They may also like you to help encourage them with the skills and changes they put in place.



Do positive activities with them

Helping them take the focus off their worries can be helpful and can improve their mood. Lots of activities can help boost the feel-good hormones we all need for our wellbeing, so think about whether there is a relaxing, fun, or fulfilling activity you could do together.

Give them time out

Just like spending time doing enjoyable things together may help boost their mood, doing something on their own may be just what they need. Encourage them to go and do something that brings them joy or relaxation.

Offer support and encouragement while they do their course

CBT is effective, but it takes work. It requires lots of effort, determination, courage, and patience to face things people may have been avoiding or may feel anxious about. Offering encouragement, praise, and comfort is so helpful and will help keep them motivated to keep going.

Avoid giving too much advice or being critical

It can take a long time and lots of hard work to build skills to cope with challenges and feel confident again. Remember, you're not responsible or to blame for their mental health difficulties, and you can't fix things so don't put pressure on yourself.

Try not to underestimate the difficulties your partner or loved one is experiencing

New situations such as breastfeeding or settling a newborn are challenging. Try to validate (understand) how they are feeling rather than judging their distress.

Don't rush to 'save the day'

Try not to rush to help every time the baby cries or your partner needs help. Let your loved one gain confidence in her own skills as a mother.

Most importantly, listen

Often the best answer is just to listen. When feeling distressed, most people just want to be heard and know that they're supported.

Important information to know as a support person

- When your loved one starts making changes, their anxiety may increase before it gets better. Keep reminding them they can cope, and that what they're doing will make a difference to how they're feeling in time.
- Your loved one's moods may go up and down. It's normal for our moods to change anyway, but when we've been feeling really low it can be a bit of a bumpy ride before our moods become better and steadier again.
- Be aware that it will be harder for your loved one to make changes in their behaviours at times of great stress.
- Your wellbeing matters too. It's important to know what you feel comfortable doing to help and what you need to do to look after your own wellbeing. You may be feeling lots of uncomfortable emotions, including worry, frustration, and maybe resentment. These are normal feelings given what you're going through as a support person for your loved one.

Support for whānau

Getting some support for yourself and other whānau might make all the difference. Consider speaking to your healthcare professional about your options here. You may find the following websites and helplines helpful.

- (1737) You can free call or text 1737 any time, 24 hours a day to speak with a trained counsellor
- [Yellow Brick Road](#) – Yellow Brick Road is a national organisation providing support, knowledge, advocacy, and empowerment for families who have a loved one experiencing mental health challenges.
- [Mental Health Foundation](#) – the Mental Health Foundation has a great resource page for whānau and friends who are supporting a loved one struggling with their mental wellbeing.

Key things to remember:

- **Anxiety and depression don't last forever, and people often feel better with time.**
- **Be honest and communicate with your partner or loved one about concerns you may have about their anxiety and moods, and ask how you can help and what might not be helpful.**
- **As a supporter, it's important to take care of your own emotional wellbeing. Seek support for yourself if you need it.**

We hope you have found this resource helpful and we wish you and your loved one all the best for the future.

Nga mihi,

The Just a Thought Team
www.justathought.co.nz