

Conversation Guide

Talking to Someone About Perinatal Mental Health

Becoming a parent is one of life's most significant transitions. Along with the joy of welcoming a new baby, many new or expecting parents may also experience mental health challenges

This guide will help you navigate conversations about perinatal mental health with care and empathy

Recognising Signs of Perinatal Mental Health Challenges

During pregnancy and after childbirth, hormonal changes, exhaustion, and the pressures of caring for a newborn can affect mental well-being

Emotional Signs:

- Persistent sadness or crying
- Feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or failure as a parent
- Anxiety or worry, especially about the baby's health or safety
- Feeling overwhelmed or out of control
- Low mood that doesn't seem to improve over time
- Lack of connection or bonding with the baby

Physical Signs:

- Difficulty sleeping (even when the baby is sleeping)
- Extreme fatigue or lack of energy
- Changes in appetite, either eating too much or too little
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Lack of interest in personal care (e.g., showering or eating regularly)

Behavioural Signs:

- Avoiding family, friends, or social situations
- Reluctance to care for the baby or feeling resentful of the baby
- Increased use of alcohol or other substances as a coping mechanism
- Difficulty focusing or making decisions
- Excessive worry about being a "bad parent"

Recognising these signs in a new or expectant parent is a good starting point for beginning a supportive conversation.

Preparing for the Conversation

Before starting a conversation about perinatal mental health, consider the best way to approach the subject with care and respect

Choose a Quiet, Comfortable Environment:

- Find a place where you both feel safe and comfortable, whether at home, on the phone, or outdoors
- Ensure privacy and make sure there are no distractions, especially from others who may overhear or interrupt

Be Present:

- Give your full attention and listen without interruptions
- Let them know they are in a safe space where they can share her thoughts without being judged

Starting the Conversation

It's often difficult for new parents to open up about their mental health due to feelings of shame, guilt, or the pressure to appear as though they're coping well. Approach the conversation with gentleness and curiosity

Examples of open-ended questions:

“How are you feeling today? It's okay if it's not all positive.”

“I've noticed you seem a bit overwhelmed recently. How have you been feeling since the baby arrived?”

“Pregnancy and parenthood are huge changes. How have you been coping with everything?”

These questions invite them to share without feeling judged

Do's and Don'ts for a Supportive Conversation

When speaking to a new or expecting parent about mental health, sensitivity is crucial. Here are some guidelines to help the conversation be as supportive as possible.

Do: Show Empathy and Validate Feelings

Acknowledging how difficult parenthood can be is key. Instead of offering sympathy, try to offer empathy. You might say, "It sounds like you're going through a lot right now. I'm here to listen."

Do: Reflect and Clarify

If they share something that seems unclear, reflect it back in a gentle and inviting way. For example, "You said you've been feeling disconnected from the baby. Can you tell me more about what that's been like?"

Do: Offer Reassurance

It's important to remind them that seeking support is a sign of strength, not failure. "It's okay to feel this way. Being a new parent is incredibly hard, and it's normal to need help."

Do: Ask What They Think Might Help

Instead of suggesting solutions, ask, "What do you think would help right now?" This empowers her to identify her own needs rather than feeling like she's being told what to do.

Don't: Offer Solutions Right Away

Avoid jumping in with advice like "sleep when the baby sleeps" or "just take a break." While well-meaning, these responses can sometimes come across as dismissive. Instead, focus on listening.

Don't: Minimise Her Experience

Comments like "It's just the baby blues" or "All new parents feel this way" can minimise her experience. Every parent's mental health journey is unique, so avoid brushing off any concerns.

Don't: Compare Experience to Others'

Avoid comparing the situation to someone else's or your own. Statements like "I went through something similar" may unintentionally shift the focus away from her experience.

Empowering Them to Seek Help

While you can offer emotional support, it's important to remember that professional help may be necessary. Many parents struggle with asking for help, so providing them with clear options can make this step less daunting

Provide Information, Not Instructions:

Gently suggest talking to a midwife, health visitor, or GP, especially if the symptoms persist.

Let them know that many professionals specialise in perinatal mental health, and reaching out is common and encouraged.

Offer to help find resources if she's unsure where to start, such as online communities, support groups, or perinatal mental health services.

Signposting Options:

Encourage them to book an extended appointment with her GP to discuss mental health in depth.

Reassure that it's okay to take her time.

They may also feel more comfortable with a trusted friend, family member, or partner attending the appointment for support.

Some helpful organisations include:

Maternal Mental Health Alliance

PANDAS Foundation

MIND

Taking Care of Yourself

Supporting someone through perinatal mental health struggles can be emotionally challenging. Remember to take care of your own well-being and set boundaries when necessary. It's okay to step back and seek support for yourself if you feel overwhelmed.

Perinatal mental health challenges can feel isolating, but your willingness to listen without judgment can provide comfort and relief. Be patient, open, and ready to guide your loved one toward professional help when needed. Every small gesture of support can make a big difference in the journey to better mental health.

If symptoms worsen or there is any indication that the person may be in immediate danger, such as expressing thoughts of harming themselves or others, it is crucial to seek help immediately.

Encourage them to:

- Contact their GP or midwife urgently
- Call emergency services (999 in the UK) if they are in crisis
- Reach out to a 24/7 helpline such as **Samaritans** (116 123) or a local crisis team
- Take them to the nearest A&E if necessary