

MOTHERS FIRST



A RESOURCE FOR BEFORE & AFTER PREGNANCY

for moms, their family and friends

Adapted by the Red Deer & Area Maternal Mental Health Steering Committee
from the Mothers' Mental Health Toolkit, with permission from the Lloydminster
Maternal Mental Health Initiative Steering Committee.

RED DEER & AREA MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH STEERING COMMITTEE



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Mothers' Mental Health Toolkit

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Second Edition - July 2026

MOTHERS MENTAL HEALTH

matters

to the development of

STRONG CHILDREN & HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Dear Brave New Family,

First, we would like to offer congratulations on your beautiful new baby. No matter how you arrived at this moment, please know that your parenting journey is uniquely your own, and every feeling you have along the way is valid.

When my first son was born, my experience with motherhood was full of joy. When I welcomed my second child four years later, I anticipated that same smooth transition. Instead, I was met with an immediate, heavy sinking feeling that something was deeply wrong. Over the next six weeks, I watched my world change as I faced an overwhelming battle with postpartum psychosis, depression, and anxiety. I experienced increasing feelings of anger, a frightening lack of interest in my baby, and eventually, a complete and terrifying numbness. It rocked me to my core, and I spent the better part of a year in and out of hospitals, navigating my way through the darkness.

The shame, confusion, and guilt I felt initially prevented me from speaking up. I was terrified of judgment, worried about what might happen to my family, and completely isolated by the fear that my struggles weren't even worth discussing. I know exactly how heavy that silence can feel, and how exhausting it is to pretend you are okay when everything inside is falling apart. It wasn't until my world completely collapsed that I was able to get the professional help I so desperately needed.

I share the raw truth of my journey because I want you to know that I see you and you are **not** alone. There is no shame in struggling, and there is immense strength in reaching out for help. I encourage you to confide in someone you trust and break the silence.

We are a community of parents walking this path beside you. It truly takes a village, and you do not have to carry this weight by yourself. We are here, and we welcome you with open arms.

Warm regards,

Chelsea Ramsey

Mother & Co-Chair of the Red Deer & Area Maternal Mental Health Steering Committee



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The vision of the Red Deer & Area Maternal Mental Health Steering Committee is to ensure every parent has the support, connection, and care they need to build a strong foundation for themselves and their child. We believe that supporting maternal mental health strengthens families and builds healthier and resilient communities. The Mothers First Resource is one piece of a comprehensive strategy to achieve this vision.

This resource is not a diagnostic or treatment manual, but rather a resource intended to provide information and empower mothers to reach out for support.

It provides families and friends with practical suggestions on how they can support mothers effectively, by promoting wellness and self-care.

Mothers First provides easy to use, plain language information that helps mothers to identify and describe how they are feeling and encourages them to seek out supports.



IN THE BOOK:

- General Health
- Exercise & Movement
- Rest & Sleep
- Relaxation
- Stress Management
- Self-Development
- Definitions & Realities of Motherhood
- Attachment Development
- Emotional Coping Strategies
- Social Supports
- Relationship Health
- Parenting
- Determinants of Progress
- Signs & Symptoms
- Assessment & Screening
- Recovery
- The Plan & Schedule

SUPPORTS IN RED DEER & AREA INCLUDE:

[211 Alberta](#): Call or Text 211 for community resources and support services.

Access Addiction & Mental Health: 1-888-594-0211

[Canada's Suicide Crisis Helpline](#): Call or Text 988

Distress Centre: 1-403-266-4357 (24-hour support, counselling, and resources)

[Health Link](#): Call 811

[Help In Tough Times](#)

Mental Health Hotline: 1-877-303-2642

IF YOU ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER OR FEEL UNABLE TO KEEP YOURSELF OR YOUR BABY SAFE, CALL 911 OR GO TO YOUR NEAREST EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT.

Self-Care Checklist ✓

Being a mother is hard work. In fact, some call it the hardest job in the world.

It's important that mothers take care of themselves as well as their children. This checklist will help you figure out how you are doing at taking care of yourself and identify areas you might need help with. It is helpful to discuss this checklist with a support person or service provider; sometimes an outside view can make things clearer.

Adapted from www.houstonpostpartum.com/checklist.htm

Example:

	How are you doing now? (0 = worst, 5 = best)	How important is this item to you? (0 = least important, 5 = most important)	Would you like help with this? (✓ For yes)	What would that help look like?
Nutrition/Food (do you think you're eating well?)	2 (poorly)	5	✓	My boyfriend to help make meals
Movement/Exercise (do you feel you are getting enough movement?)	3 (doing OK)	3		Even 15 minutes without the baby to do a few exercises
Sleep/Rest (do you have time to recharge?)	1 (very poorly)	4	✓	I could try to plan for a short rest every day
Relaxation (do you get time to yourself?)	4 (fairly well)	3		Watching my favourite show could be my time off
Stress (are you upset and/or anxious?)	4 (fairly well)	4		Learning which problems I could maybe do something about
Substance Use (do you use alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes to cope?)	5 (doing excellent)	5		Having my friend distract me when I am trying to cut down on smokes
Self-esteem (how do you feel about yourself?)	1 (very low)	4	✓	Asking someone I trust things I do well

General Health
Self-Care Checklist ✓

Mother

	How are you doing now? (0 = worst, 5 = best)	How important is this item to you? (0 = least important, 5 = most important)	Would you like help with this? (✓ For yes)	What would that help look like?
Nutrition/Food (do you think you're eating well?)				
Movement/Exercise (do you feel you are getting enough movement?)				
Sleep/Rest (do you have time to recharge?)				
Relaxation (do you get time to yourself?)				
Stress (are you upset and/or anxious?)				
Substance Use (do you use alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes to cope?)				
Self-esteem (how do you feel about yourself?)				

Your Body Health is Important

Think back to when you last lost your temper or had a big melt-down. Now try to remember if your response might have been related to your toddler being up all night or the fact that you had a chocolate bar for supper.

When you're overtired or haven't eaten properly or your body is aching all over, you're more likely to get upset at something you'd normally be able to handle. It's all about balance. If your body feels okay, then you're not as likely to lose it, and that's better for everybody!

Body health includes things like:

- getting enough sleep
- stretching and moving
- eating nutritious food that will keep you going
- cutting back on harmful habits
- relaxing from the hard work of mothering
- paying attention to any aches and pains that won't go away and getting help

The chart that follows will help you figure out exactly how your body is doing and highlight any areas you might want to pay attention to. You may want to post this chart on your fridge so you remember to fill it out.

If you're a new mom, your doctor or other health provider should check on your health as well as your baby's. Take this list to your doctor to highlight your symptoms and concerns.

Sometimes women live in areas where it is difficult to access a doctor. If this is the case, please contact a community service provider such as a public health nurse, mental health social worker, or family resource staff person. With their help you may learn about what services are provided in your local area.

Your Body Health is Important ✓



	daily	weekly	monthly	once in a while
headache				
tiredness				
dizziness				
breathing problems				
heart racing				
muscle aches and pains				
back pain				
tummy trouble				
bowel trouble (constipation, diarrhea)				
bladder/urine (burning, itching, pain when urinating)				
menstrual problems (irregular periods)				
gynecological issues (vaginal infections, pain or bleeding during sex)				
other?				
other?				

Preparing for my Medical Appointment

For ME:

Things to TELL the doctor/practitioner about my health:

Example: I am having trouble sleeping.

Things to ASK the doctor/practitioner about my health:

Example: Should I have my thyroid checked?

Preparing for my Medical Appointment

Mother

For MY CHILD:

Things to TELL the doctor/practitioner about my child's health:

Example: He pulls his right ear and cried sometimes.

Things to ASK the doctor/practitioner about my child's health:

Example: Do you think he is old enough to have some cereal at bedtime?

Moms can't always find the time or place for physical activities. However, we all feel better when our bodies get regular activity and stretching. Movement can help with stress and tension and encourage better sleep patterns. A walk to the corner store or playing with your children counts as exercise!

If you're currently not active at all, try starting with 15 minutes a day and see if it helps improve your mood. Try it even when you feel tired, sad, or frustrated.

It can be very difficult to exercise on a regular basis while caring for small children. **Here's some ideas for how to do both:**

Dance with your baby

Using a sling or carrier or just holding your baby in your arms, turn on some music (not too loud!) and free dance with your child.

If you have older children, they can dance with you too. Not only will you feel better, but your children are learning to enjoy rhythm, movement, and music and get some exercise too!

Interval walking with baby in stroller

How to do it:

This walk is marked by two speeds. You'll start with one minute of walking at a moderately brisk pace (a 13- to 14-minute half-kilometre). At the end of one minute, switch to a very fast pace (a 12-minute half-kilometre) for a minute. You'll repeat each of these one-minute intervals five times.



Exercise with Baby!

Form facts:

When you're switching to the faster-paced walk, take shorter, quicker steps – don't lengthen your stride. And if you're walking alone or with your baby in a front carrier, pump your arms more rapidly to pick up speed. No matter what, don't slow down too much during the slower minutes – you still want to maintain a challenging pace.

Quick tip:

If you don't want to be constantly eyeing your watch, time your intervals using telephone poles. Simply switch paces after every five you pass. (You'll still need a watch or alarm to tell you when you've walked for the entire 10 minutes.)

Adapted from www.babyzone.com

Try This!

Crunch with Twist

Sit down on the floor with your knees bent and feet flat.

Hold your baby across your chest.

Sit up as tall as you can and then lean back until your stomach is tight.

You can hold this position for 10 or 15 seconds or do a slight twist in each direction and hold.



There's Nothing Like a Good Night's Sleep

Enough sleep can be difficult to get for mothers. Sleep allows our brain and body to regroup, with better mood control and stress tolerance as a result.

Rest may not be the same as sleep, but mothers need these time outs as well to recharge. Take small breaks. Do simple things you enjoy, that relax you, to reset your energy and interest.

Test this recipe for sleep

Sometimes it is challenging for mothers to get a full night's sleep. If there is someone who can help with the baby at night, let him/her, and give yourself time to rest and recharge. However, if your children are sleeping through the night and you're still having trouble, here are some helpful tips:



Recipe

Try to reduce consuming caffeine, energy drinks, and smoking during the day.

Avoid alcohol at bedtime as it can appear to relax you, but will actually disrupt your sleep during the night.

Eat a small snack but not a large meal before bed.

Take it easy at bedtime - nothing too active. Try a warm bath; warm milk; or deep, relaxing breaths.

Try sleeping in the same place every night.

Make any to-do lists early in the evening and then try not to think about problems that need solving or things that need doing.

Try to use positive images where you picture yourself relaxing and sleeping well.

There's Nothing Like a Good Night's Sleep

Here are some questions to help you become more aware of your sleep patterns. If you are worried about your sleep, please share this list with your doctor or health care provider.

How many hours do I sleep at night?

Is my sleep different from night to night?

Where do I sleep?

Who else sleeps with me? What is their sleep like?

What was my sleep style before I became a mother? Has it changed?

Do I have a routine for sleep?

Are there any substances that make me sleepy? Or make me more alert?

Is there anyone who could help out so I can get more rest?

Do I have nightmares or anything unusual happening in my sleep?

Have I ever taken medications to help with sleep?

Do I sleep in the daytime?

Are there any situations where I make my own rest and sleep come first?

Other Women's Relaxing Ideas

Relaxation means different things to different people. For some, it means sleep. For others, it means a vacation. And for others, it means a break from worrying and feeling stressed.

Here are some ideas that other women have come up with to relax:

"I lie down and at least rest while the baby sleeps; then I do some jobs."

Once or twice I've had to go to the bathroom to find a few minutes for myself.

"Music always takes me away; sometimes I dance by myself!"

"Sometimes I need to just sit and not do anything."

"I sit back and watch my favourite show; even if I have to tape it."

"I try to close my eyes and think of old times that give me a laugh."

"I'll try to screen phone calls, because I can only deal with certain people right now."

"I'll make a list for the day, but leave some free time."

It's important to take care of yourself, even while you're taking care of your baby or other children. As a mother, you'll find that you just can't get as much done as you used to and that's okay.

And even if there are other things undone, it might help to take time for a relaxation exercise like the ones on the next page.

Sample Relaxation Practices

Muscle Relaxation

Lie down on the floor and stretch out your arms to the side, your legs slightly apart. Close your eyes and picture lying in a large clean empty room with a very easy breeze coming in the window. You can hear waves softly coming outside and a few birds calling.

Stretch your arms out as though you can touch the side walls and then relax them there.

Next, point your feet towards the end wall, hold, and then relax.

Stretch up through your neck and reach the very top of your head towards the back wall.

Now, just let your body go where it wants and breathe out like you're softly blowing out a candle.

Breathing Relaxation

Controlled breathing exercises can help your whole body and mind relax. Sit or lie in a comfortable position for you. Close your eyes or stare at a pleasant object in the room that doesn't move. Imagine your body as a balloon.

Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth as slowly and evenly as possible. Fill the balloon up with air until it feels slightly uncomfortable and tight. Hold that breath briefly. You'll feel your shoulders rise. Like blowing out a candle, begin to let the air out of the balloon, all the way until your lungs feel almost empty. Your shoulders will relax down as the air goes out.

Repeat the rhythm of breathing in and out as slowly and deliberately as possible for 5 to 10 minutes, trying to focus on how your body feels as you do this. Busy thoughts may try to come in, but put them aside to focus back on your important job of only breathing.



The bills are due but there's no money. Your baby has to go to the hospital in the middle of the night. The principal wants to meet with you to discuss your son's behaviour at school. These are just some examples of stressful situations.

Even positive changes may cause us to feel a certain amount of stress; adjusting to changes affects us all. Everyone has stress in their lives – the situations just look different.

Managing stress is important to mental wellness and coping. Here are some things to keep in mind when you're dealing with stress.

Focus on what you **can do**, not what is wrong. Taking a few simple and positive steps will make you feel better about yourself and your ability to cope.

- **Brainstorm possible solutions (doing this with a friend can be fun).**
- **Break your problem down into manageable chunks.**
- **Make a plan with steps and put it into action.**

Get support.

- **Resist the urge to give up or run away.**
- **Try not to bottle up your emotions; express your feelings by talking or writing them down.**

- **Ask for help from family or friends (child care, daily tasks).**

Take care of yourself.

- **Eat healthy foods and drink lots of water.**
- **Do something active every day.**
- **Plan fun activities.**
- **Spend time with people who love you.**
- **Try to get a good night's sleep.**

If your strategies don't change your experience of stress, you may want to find professional help.

There are many places you can go for help, including your family doctor or a drop-in health clinic. If you feel you might harm yourself or someone else, let someone who cares about you know what is happening so they can help keep you and your loved ones safe.

Please speak to your health care provider about local resources that provide parenting support.

There is no one way to cope with stress. Different coping actions work for different people. Try out some options to see what helps you!

Changes in my body

- _____ My muscles feel tense.
- _____ My breathing and heart rate feel quicker.
- _____ I'm having headaches or stomach aches.
- _____ I'm seeing changes in my sleep or appetite.
- _____ I've had diarrhea.
- _____ I'm feeling tired.

Changes in my actions

- _____ I'm using more alcohol.
- _____ I find myself withdrawing from others.
- _____ I'm smoking more.
- _____ I'm drinking more coffee.
- _____ I'm using other drugs.
- _____ I don't have as much patience as usual.
- _____ I've been avoiding situations that are stressful.
- _____ I keep fidgeting.

Changes in my emotions

- _____ I feel worried and confused.
- _____ I'm angry and irritable.
- _____ I'm sad and depressed.
- _____ I feel like I can't cope.

Changes in my thinking

- _____ I'm having trouble concentrating, remembering, making decisions.
- _____ My thoughts are racing.
- _____ I've lost my self-confidence.
- _____ I have a negative attitude towards myself and my life.

Signs of stress may include changes in your body, actions, emotions, and thinking. Identifying these changes may help you better manage your stress. Check any that apply to you below. If you check yes to most or all of these items then you may want to speak with a health care provider about ways to manage stress. This could include groups run by mental health providers, self-help groups, or individual counselling.

*Adapted from Wellness module 2: stress and well being. Primer Fact Sheets | 2009
| Stress | www.heretohelp.bc.ca*

Self-development

Who Am I?

A clear and strong sense of self prepares a woman for mothering. How you feel about yourself can be described as self-esteem. When you don't have good self-esteem, you may put other people before yourself, make poor decisions, form relationships with people who do not treat you well, or distrust your own emotions.

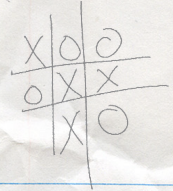
Certain life events, such as becoming a mother and tackling the many challenges of parenting can make already shaky self-esteem worse. This new role might affect your confidence and ability to cope.

A positive sense of self isn't the same as thinking too much of yourself, putting yourself before others, or having unrealistic ideas of your life and needs. Investing in yourself can strengthen your confidence and improve your self-esteem as a woman and as a mother.

One of the ways we can challenge the negative thoughts about ourselves is to deliberately focus on our positive qualities. To do that, we must become more aware of ourselves. The following questions will get you thinking about yourself, your past, and your present life.

Try answering the following questions to describe yourself.





My friends would say the best thing about me is

My favourite thing to do as a child was

I spend a lot of time

My pet peeve is

I admire

because

I am proud of

I think it is unfair when

In the future, I would most like to



I believe the most important thing a mother can do for her children is

One thing I would like to change about myself is

The Many Hats of Motherhood



Throughout a woman's life she has many different roles. As a teen you might have been a friend, granddaughter, student, employee, or team mate. As a mother you will again have many different roles. Some people would call that "wearing many hats." Below are some of the "hats" mothers wear, parenting children of all ages. Maybe you can think of others.

<p><i>Mother as Provider</i></p>	<p><i>Mother as Protector</i></p>
<p>Provides food Provides warm, safe place to sleep Provides medical care Provides fresh air</p>	<p>Protects from falls or injury Protects feelings Protects from harm from others</p>
<p><i>Mother as Caregiver</i></p>	<p><i>Mother as Educator</i></p>
<p>Gives attention to her babies Gives hugs and kisses Gives care when something hurts Gives praise</p>	<p>Teaches self-love and worth Teaches respect and kindness Teaches safety Teaches good ways to cope with all feelings</p>
<p><i>Mother as...</i></p>	<p><i>Mother as...</i></p>
	

Common Thoughts About Motherhood – True or False?

"I feel like I should always know exactly what my baby needs... Like all other mothers know more than me".

— Client, Reproductive Mental Health Services, 2010

Do you believe these ideas?

- Mothers **always** know why their babies cry.
- Mothers **never** feel frustrated with their infants.
- Mothers **have to do all** baby care in order to bond.
- Mothers **have to be perfect** or their children will grow up to hate them.
- All mothers **automatically** love their babies from the first moment.
- Wanting breaks from caring for your children makes you a **bad** mother.
- Mothers should **never** feel sorry for themselves.
- Feeling like you want to **escape** makes you a bad mother.
- Breastfeeding is the **only** type of feeding that provides the baby with both the necessary nutrition and interaction needed for healthy development.

These statements are **false**.

However, you may have heard them from friends, family or in the community.

Adapted from Solchany, JoAnne E., Promoting Maternal Mental Health during Pregnancy: Theory, Practice & Intervention. Seattle, WA: NCAST Publications

Attachment Development

A parent who attends to their infant in a sensitive, supportive manner and is open to the **full range** of her child's needs will ensure a secure attachment between herself and her child. One of the keys to positive child outcome is a mother's ability to know and read her particular child. A secure attachment allows the woman to trust her own mothering instincts and decisions.

The three most important times for a mother to respond to her baby's crying are:

- **When they are sick**
- **When they are hurt**
- **When they are upset**

The following exercise is to be shared with mothers; it focuses on enhancing attachment between a mother and her small child.

Sources:

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Volume I. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Benoit, D. Goldberg, S. Wolpert, R. (1998). *A Simple Gift: Comforting Your Baby*. Mental Health Promotion Project, Department of Psychiatry, The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M., Water, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.



Building a Strong Bond with Your Baby

Below are some ideas about building a strong bond with your baby. Attaching with your child is the starting place for your baby's learning to trust others and handle feelings. This base is important for your success as a mother and your lifelong connection with your child.

Did You Know?

- Positive emotional attachment has been shown to increase the brain development of young children, even after illness or difficult times.
- Your baby is wired for joy. “Life is good because my mom enjoys being with me.”
- Babies soak up affection through their skin! Holding your baby helps to build love, and safety and organize difficult feelings.
- Look into your baby's eyes often. They are a window to their inner world. Notice when your child wants to look back, that's when they want to connect.
- When it's safe and possible, follow your child's lead for attention, to be held, to explore, to seek a place to show their feelings
- You can't spoil a baby under 9–11 months old with attention and response. Research shows responding to little babies helps them be more independent as they grow older.
- Stay with your child when they have difficult feelings. They learn to trust difficult feelings won't be too much for them or for you.
- Children learn from you showing gentle feelings, naming their feelings, and knowing it's okay to share feelings out loud.
- Being a good parent is not about being perfect, it's about being “good enough.”
- Your baby hopes you'll be stronger, wiser, and kinder than they feel themselves. You can practice this even if you don't always feel this all the time yourself.

Adapted from Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell (2000) www.circleofsecurity.org

What Babies Have To Say!

This is information that outlines what actions help to develop attachment or bond at different ages. It shows how your child feels and what they may need from you.

Birth to two months

- You can hold me as much as you want.
- You can't spoil me.
- Crying is how I tell you that I need something. I don't cry to make you angry.
- If you think you have taken care of all my needs and I am still crying, hold me and comfort me.
- Smile at me, laugh, sing to me, rock me, dance with me gently, talk to me softly. This is how our relationship grows.

Two to seven months

- When I look at you, smile, coo, and reach up to you, I want you to respond to me.
- Crying is how I tell you that I need something. I don't cry to make you angry.
- If I turn away, I need a break.
- When I am hurt, sick, or afraid, I need you to hold me right away.

Seven to twelve months

- I prefer to be with the few people who look after me the most. I am upset by people I don't know.
- I get upset when you leave me. Hug and cuddle me when you leave and again when you come back; then I will learn that I am safe and secure.
- Play and talk with me face to face.
- Watch me play and follow my lead. If you always direct my play I will stop trying.
- Think about what I need when I cry, smile, babble, or turn away.



One to two years old

- I am learning about my world. I like to explore, but when I am frightened, I need to come back to you for comfort. When I feel safe and comforted, I am ready to explore again.
- Even though I can do more things by myself, I still need love and affection.

Two to four years old

- When I want to do things on my own, let me try, as long as it is not dangerous.
- I still need you to keep me safe and comfort me when I am hurt, upset, frightened, or sick.

*Adapted from Health Canada Mental Health Promotion website, "First Connections Make All the Difference."
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/mentalhealth/mhp/pub/fc/index.html*



Helping Ourselves to Calm and Relax

Do you struggle with your emotions?

Do you overreact or underreact?

Do you have many emotional shifts in a day? ... an hour? ... minutes?

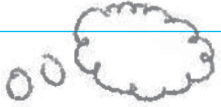
If so, here are two skills that other mothers report as helpful when feeling a great deal of distress.

1) Self-Soothing

Learning to comfort, nurture, and be kind to yourself is important. In times of distress, many of us automatically reach for something that we think will make us feel better, but that is actually unhealthy. Many of us have never learned how to self-soothe without a substance and don't know how to make ourselves feel better, calmer, or more relaxed.

Some examples of self-soothing are listening to music, taking a bath, trying muscle relaxation, watching a video, walking in nature, reading, or journaling. The goal is to come up with a list that you can practice in moments when you're upset. This is how you'll make new habits.

Can you come up with some of your own ideas to try?



Helping Ourselves to Calm and Relax

2) Improving the Moment

This skill is used in moments of distress to help one relax. **IMPROVE** stands for:

I Imagery:

Imagining a relaxing scene can help take the bite out of a distressing moment. For example: you might imagine yourself going into a safe, quiet room which is just your own. You may need to practice going into this room when you are not feeling awful, so that when you need to have it work in the moment, it will.

M Meaning:

Finding some purpose or meaning in what you are experiencing can be helpful. Some people who are religious might find a spiritual meaning. For others, it may be about figuring out how they can grow as a person. Is there some purpose or value in this experience, however painful? Is there anything I can learn from this?

P Prayer/Meditation/Reflection:

Whether it's to a God or the Universe or whatever your belief is, sometimes just asking for help and being open to receiving it is helpful. Prayer can help if you're trying to just accept your situation and cope in the moment.

R Relaxation:

This is an easy one (maybe!) where you can try to relax your body and slow your breathing. One trick for relaxing muscles is to actually tighten the muscle you want to relax and then let go. With your breath, inhale deeply, hold for a few seconds, and then slowly let go. You'll be amazed how different you feel after a few of those. You may even feel light-headed!

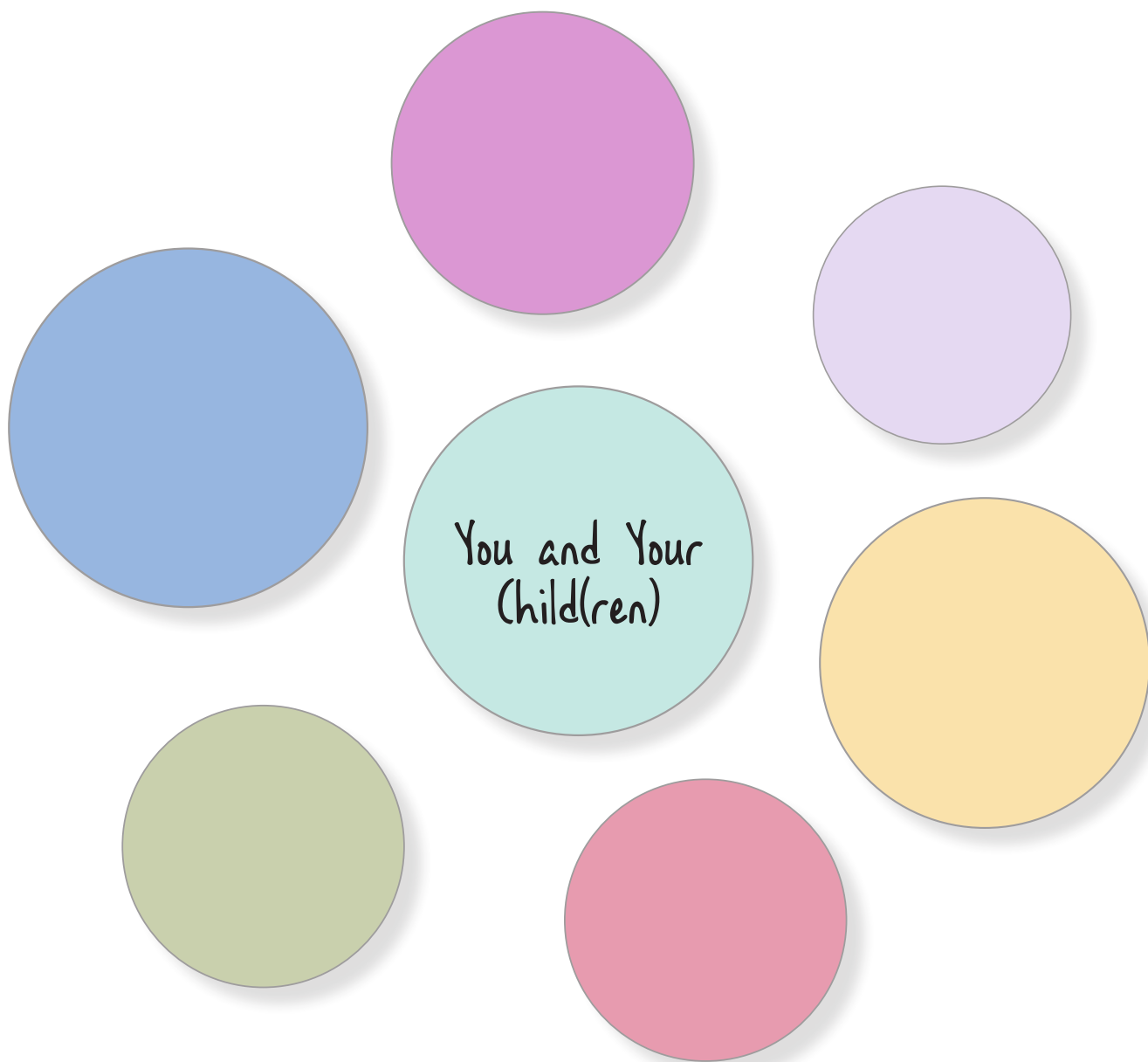
O One thing in the moment:

Focus your entire attention on what you are doing right now. This can help keep terrible, unhelpful thoughts at bay and keep you in the present.

You and Your Children: Support Map

Everyone needs support. And different kinds of support. Use this sheet to map out any supports you may have. Would you like to make any changes in your support?

Write your name and your children's names in the centre circle. Who is or could be a support in the next closest circle? Anyone further out? Are there support people you can imagine? You can draw arrows where you would like people to be.



Here's How You Can Help Me

(for the mother and her partner, family, and friends)

On the following pages are ideas from other mothers of things to watch or listen for, things to say and do. They may help you tell your partner, family, and friends how they can help you and look out for you as you adjust to motherhood. It may also be helpful to discuss these checklists with your health care provider.

Here's what I need you to listen for:

- Do I say anything that scares you?
- Do I say that I think something is wrong?
- Do I say I just don't feel like myself?
- Do I tell you I can't or don't want to do something that surprises you?
- Do I tell you I want to leave or stop all this or hurt myself?
- Do I ask you for things I don't usually ask for?
- Do I say I'm scared or too tired or unable to do what I need to do?
- Do I ask you to stay home with me all the time?
- Do I tell you I can't do this without your help?
- Do I express feelings of inadequacy, failure, or hopelessness?
- Do I keep asking you for reassurance or ask you to repeat the same thing over and over?
- Do I complain a lot about how I feel physically (headaches, stomach aches, chest pains, and shortness of breath)?
- Do I tell you we made a mistake and I don't want this child(ren)?
- Do I blame everything on our relationship?
- Do I worry that you'll leave me?
- Do I tell you that you and the baby would be better off without me?
- Do I tell you I'm a bad mother?
- Do I fear I will always feel this way?

Here's How You Can Help Me

(for the mother and her partner, family, and friends)

Here's what I need you to say:

- Tell me you will do whatever I need you to do to make sure I feel healthy.
- Tell me you can deal with my anxiety, my fears, my irritability, my moodiness.
- Tell me you are keeping an eye on how I am feeling so things won't get out of hand.
- Tell me you love me.
- Tell me I'm a good mother.
- Tell me it's okay if things aren't perfect all the time.
- Tell me you are not going to leave me no matter what.

Here's what I need you to remember:



- I'm doing the best I can.
- Sometimes the big things that seem scary at first aren't as scary as more subtle things. For instance, if I have an anxiety attack or snap at you, even though it's upsetting, it may not be as troublesome as if I'm isolating myself in the bedroom and quietly withdrawing.
- If you're not sure about something regarding how I am feeling or how I am acting please ask for help and tell me you will call my doctor or therapist.
- If I begin to show symptoms, chances are things will not get better on their own.
- Do not underestimate how much I appreciate the fact that I know I can count on you during difficult times.

Things we need to add to our list:

1.

2.

3.

Here's How You Can Help Me

(for the mother and her partner, family, and friends)

Here's what I need you to do:

- Check in with me on a regular basis, several times a day. Ask me how I'm feeling and ask me what you can do to help.
- Ask our friends and family to help whenever possible during the early weeks. Even if I resist, please insist that it's better for me to accept the help.
- Remind me that I've been through this before and things got better.
- Help me even if I don't ask.
- Insist that I rest even if I'm not able to sleep.
- Make sure I eat, even if I'm not hungry.
- Spend as much time caring for the baby as you can.
- If you are the slightest bit worried, encourage me to contact my doctor and therapist. If I protest, tell me that you will call them for me and come with me to the appointment.
- Remind me that even if everything's okay, it may be helpful and reassuring to make an appointment so we can know for sure.
- Take a walk with me.
- Help with the baby during the night. If you're not able to, please make sure someone else is there to help out so I don't get sleep deprived which would make everything worse.
- Trust your instincts if you are worried or you think something needs to be done differently.
- Talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking.
- Sit with me. Stay close even when there's nothing to say.
- Help me get professional help.
- Help me find the joy. Help me stay present and appreciate the little things. Help me find and feel the butterflies, the giggles, the hugs, the sunshine, the belly laughs, and the smiles.

Here's How You Can Help Me

(for the mother and her partner, family, and friends)

Here's what I need you NOT to do or say:

- Do not assume I am fine because I say I am.
- Do not leave everything up to me if I am feeling overwhelmed.
- Do not use this time to work harder or later or longer if I need you home during the first few weeks.
- Do not tell me to snap out of it. I can't.
- Do not let my resistance or denial get in the way of what we need to do.
- Do not tell everyone how well I'm doing if I'm not doing well.
- Please do not tell me I am strong and can do it without help if I need help.
- Please do not sabotage any effort I might need to make to seek treatment, such as resisting medication or pressuring me about the financial strain.
- Do not complain about the cost of treatment.
- Do not pressure me to have sex while I'm feeling so bad.
- Please do not do anything behind my back. If you are worried, let me know. If you want to call my doctor, let me know you are doing this.
- Do not forget to take care of yourself during this time.

Kleiman, K., and Raskin, V. (1994) This Isn't What I Expected : Overcoming Postpartum Depression. New York: Bantam.



Tips for Helping: Providing Support to a Vulnerable Mother

(for family members, partner, or friends)

Postpartum depression is a real mental illness, which means your partner cannot just snap out of it. The good news is that it is a treatable illness with positive outcomes. What makes you feel better may not work for her. Also having this illness does not mean she won't be a good mother. Here are some tips that will help:

- Tell her that she's doing well and working hard.
- Tell her she's a good mother.
- Tell her that you love her.
- Help with chores around the house.
- Make meals.
- Be ready to take the baby when your partner needs a break.
- Give her time to go for a walk, have a bath, or see a friend.
- Be affectionate without expecting sex.
- Get help yourself if you have questions or concerns.
- Talk to other dads who have been through this.
- Ask her how she is feeling.
- Be patient.
- Believe that she will get better.

✓ Moms & Their Moms

(for the mother and her partner, family, and friends)

You may need or hope for your mom's support when you have a baby. Here's a positive support checklist for you and your mom, or other family members and support persons.

Check the statements you think are true

- Tell my family I want them to bring good things to my baby's life
- Keep actions in the present; not in the thoughts of the past
- Accept that no person, mother or family can be perfect
- Ask Mom for help; don't expect help
- Expect opinions; but speak to your wishes
- Show respect; and ask for respect
- Describe your goals as a strong mother
- Ask your family how they can help you reach your goals
- Describe how your Mom acts that lowers your strength as a mother
- Give thanks and positive feedback when something helps

What would you add to the checklist for your attitudes and actions?

✓ Moms & Their Moms

(for family members, partner, or friends)

Your daughter having a baby may bring stress and change into your family. Here's a positive support checklist for grandmothers and other family members that comes from other moms and their moms.

Check off the statements that you believe and practice.
Are there some you could try?

- Remember that becoming a mother is a big job done over many years
- Ask yourself how you can help your grandchild have the best life
- Help to figure out what is most important and what can wait
- Accept that all families have stress, challenges and disappointments
- Trust that your daughter wants to see her family do well
- Focus on actions in the present now; not problems from the past
- Ask your daughter how you can help her
- Show your daughter respect; ask her to respect you
- Believe that your daughter wants to be a strong mother
- Speak with her to find out how to increase her confidence and ability
- Be careful not to take over; offer your experience, and your mistakes
- Practice communicating in positive and encouraging words

What would you add to the checklist for grandmothers(family)?

Your Partner Relationship

When you're having troubles in your relationship, it can help to take stock of what you actually have – where you started and where you are now. Answering the questions below might give you some much-needed perspective on what still works between you and help you focus on the positives.

How did you meet?

Why do you think you connected?

What did you do together that made the relationship work?

What's the best thing about your partner?

What's the most difficult thing about your partner?

Relationship Health
Your Partner Relationship

What does your partner like about you?

What does your partner find difficult about you?

What's the biggest change in your relationship?

What has helped you through difficult times in the past?

Is there a successful relationship you know that you'd like to learn from?

Could you ask the people in that relationship how it works for them?

Strategies for Positive Communication and Conflict Resolution

Try scheduling time to communicate when you are both calm. If things get heated, agree to take breaks (leave the room, breathe deeply, go for a walk) until you're both calm again.

Try to say positive things first, then follow up with what is a problem or negative from your point of view (e.g., "I really appreciate you doing the dishes, but I'm wondering if you might cook a few meals").

Try to stay focused on the present. It doesn't help to list everything that your partner has ever done wrong or every problem you've ever had.

Be specific about what is bothering you. It's more helpful to mention particulars than to say "I don't like how you're treating me lately."

Try not to "hit below the belt," to attack or weaken the other person.

Try not to make assumptions about what the other person feels or thinks; check it out with them to make sure.

Restate what you think you have heard your partner say. Sometimes we misinterpret what someone says and take their comments in a way they didn't intend.

In order to be successful and solve problems together, you'll both need to try to understand each other's feelings. Try to hear and understand the way your partner is feeling, even if it's hard and you don't think they are justified in feeling that way.

If you think your partner isn't communicating, ask them if there is anything they want to tell you.

Try not to interrupt when the other is speaking. Try not to exaggerate or overgeneralize your concerns to make them more important. They are important.

It's okay to take time out and come back to a conversation, but the "silent treatment" is not a positive strategy, even if it feels protective.

Top 10 Tips for a Partner / Co-Parent

A father/parent figure comes in many forms. When we write about partner/parents we are including biological and non-biological fathers, grandfathers, relatives, and partners who may be in the parenting role.

Respect your children's mother.

One of the best things a partner can do for his/her children is to respect their mother. Children who see their parents respecting each other are more likely to feel that they are also accepted and respected.

Spend time with your children.

How a father spends his time tells his children what's important to him. If you always seem too busy for your children, they will feel neglected no matter what you say. Treasuring children often means sacrificing other things, but children grow up quickly and you won't get these opportunities back.

Earn the right to be heard.

All too often, the only time a father speaks to his children is when they have done something wrong. That's why so many children cringe when their mothers say, "Your father wants to talk with you." Begin talking with your children when they are very young so that difficult subjects will be easier to handle as they get older. Take time and listen to their ideas and problems.

Discipline with love.

All children need guidance and discipline, not as punishment, but to set reasonable limits. Remind your children of the consequences of their actions and provide meaningful rewards for desirable behaviour. Parents who discipline in a calm and fair manner show love for their children.

Did you know?



Kids who know their dads:

Do better on average on tests that show they are growing and learning.

Are better at doing things without help, and keep control of themselves.

Are more likely to go to school, stay in school, and not repeat a grade!

*(Healthy Families, San Angelo, 92) Adapted from:
Power Source Parenting - Bethany Casarjian*

Top 10 Tips for a Partner / Co-Parent

Be a role model.

Parents are role models to their children whether they realize it or not. A girl who spends time with a loving father grows up knowing she deserves to be treated with respect by boys and what to look for in a partner. Fathers can teach sons what is important in life by demonstrating honesty, humility, and responsibility.

Be a teacher.

Too many fathers think teaching is something others do. But a father who teaches his children about rights and wrongs, and encourages them to do their best, will see his children make good choices. Involved fathers use everyday examples to help their children learn the basic lessons of life.

Eat together as a family.

Sharing a meal together (breakfast, lunch, or dinner) can be an important part of healthy family life. In addition to providing some structure in a busy day, it gives children the chance to talk about what they are doing and want to do. It is also a good time for parents to listen and give advice. Most importantly, it is a time for families to be together each day.

Read to your children.

In a world where television often dominates the lives of children, it is important that fathers make the effort to read to their children. Begin reading to your children when they are very young. When they are older, encourage them to read on their own. Research proves that if you do this, your children are more likely to be successful in life.

Show affection.

Children need the security that comes from knowing they are wanted, accepted, and loved by their family. Parents, especially fathers, need to feel both comfortable and willing to hug their children. Showing affection everyday is the best way to let your children know that you love them.

Realize that a parent's job is never done.

Even after children are grown and ready to leave home, they will still look to their parents for wisdom and advice about things like continued schooling, a new job, or planning a family.

A Dad's Guide to Crying Babies

(for partners or friends)

It's the middle of the night. Your son just ate an hour ago and, for no apparent reason, has spent the last 20 minutes crying. Exhausted, mom is close to losing it. You have to go to work early and you need sleep too. What do you do?

1. Develop a checklist of reasons your baby cries.

Starting with the most common, a typical list might include

hungry		dirty or wet diaper	
diaper pinching skin		tired	
diaper rash		Frustrated	
needs burping		too hot/too cold	
needs to be held		gas/constipated	
clothes rubbing		too much noise/too quiet	
alone			

2. Check each reason in sequence, ruling out problems as you try solutions.

3. Check for new problems.

Sometimes crying is caused by random things, his finger may be bent back in his sleeve or hair might be wrapped around his toe. Of course, if you think your baby needs medical attention, call your doctor.

4. Move on to new techniques.

Not every problem will have a single answer. Being proactive also means trying new solutions for old problems.

Feeding		distraction		tummy pressure	
bouncy seat		backpack		swaddling	
walk him/her		sucking		music	
burping		ride in the car		Frontpack or sling	
running dryer		bicycle legs		rocking	
infant swing		changing diaper		massage	
holding		white noise		stroller or jogger	

A Dad's Guide to Crying Babies

(for partners or friends)

5. Sometimes nothing works.

Sometimes there is nothing you can do to calm your baby and make him happy. As harsh as this might seem at the time, if you feel yourself losing control, put the baby down in the safety of his crib and walk away. Although they may be fleeting, episodes of extreme frustration due to a crying baby are extremely dangerous. Never react in anger. Getting agitated and shaking a baby can permanently damage an infant's brain and may even lead to death. Walk away before nonstop crying pushes you to a danger point.

*Adapted from Dads Adventure Magazine (2009). Troubleshooter's Guide to: Crying Babies, 1(3), 8.
www.dadsadventure.com*

What Can I do to Help Myself Recover?

- Give yourself a central role in returning to wellness
- Learn as much as you can about your problem – how it began, what helps, what it is called
- Try as hard as you can to lower your immediate stress load. Come back to some jobs and problems later
- Find help in treatment and seek to work well and speak freely with your service provider
- Improve the kind and amount of support you receive from others
- Practice good self-care and attention: it's not just an extra
- Seek the support you need from your partner; try to communicate and repeat what you need and how helpful they can be to you
- Don't wait too long with difficult symptoms. Getting help and treatment early lessens the length of any illness
- Practice picturing yourself feeling and doing better. Expect to see some improvement
- Encourage yourself to be willing to attempt changes for the better
- Limit your use of substances that may change your thinking or mood. They can interfere with therapy and medication
- Limit the conflict with others that you have to take on. Even some important issues can wait a bit; put your recovery first

Mental Health Check-Up Checklist

Check the statements that seem like you. These reflect experiences of other women with mental health challenges in mothering. Many women have experienced changed thoughts, feelings, or behaviours.

If you have several areas of change or concern, you could take one of our screening tests or simply bring the checklist to your health care provider. Screens like this don't make a diagnosis, but they do show you if it's reasonable to arrange an assessment of your mental health.



Mental Health Check-Up Checklist

✓	Check the statements that seem like you:
	Do you feel sad or low most of the day for no reason?
	Have you lost interest in your usual activities?
	Do you feel an unusual degree of fear or anger?
	Have you been snapping at your family and can't figure out why?
	Do you worry about a lack of interest or connection with your baby?
	Are you crying for no known reason?
	Do you continue to feel tired even after resting/sleeping?
	Do you have difficulty relaxing?
	Is it hard to fall asleep even though the baby is sleeping?
	Has your appetite increased or decreased from usual?
	Are you losing or gaining a lot of weight?
	Do you feel like your thinking is fuzzy or do you have difficulty concentrating?
	Is there a loss of your ability to feel pleasure?
	Are there particular ideas of guilt or negativity you keep having?
	Do you feel hopeless without a reason?
	Do you think about wanting to harm yourself, even if you haven't acted on it?
	Do you have sudden thoughts come into your mind that feel forced, frightening, or unusual for you?
	Have you worried about any loss of control over your thinking or emotions?
	Have you worried you don't feel as close to your baby as you thought you would?
	Do you ever have ideas of running away or disappearing?
	Has your motivation for routine jobs and activities changed?
	Do you feel unusually impulsive, jumpy, or hyper?
	Do you feel you are thinking about death or other disasters too much?
	Do you worry it was a mistake to become a mother?
	Do you feel like your thinking is way too slow or too fast?
	Do you experience any unusual sounds, images, voices, or sensations?
	Has your ability to function in your life changed a lot?

Perinatal Mental Health Assessment

1. What are your current complaints/concerns?
2. Has there been a change in you? Is there anything different that is causing problems?
3. How do you sleep? How is your appetite? How is your energy, concentration, and motivation? How is your general physical health?
4. What is your typical mood? Does it change or vary?
5. Do you see any triggers to your mood changes?
6. Are there any new stressors in your life?
7. Have you ever had “hormone” effects on your mood (e. g., PMS before your period starts)?
8. Have you ever experienced other emotional difficulties or wondered about a mental health diagnosis?
9. Does any kind of mental health problem seem to run in your birth family?
10. Have you had experiences in the past that seemed to affect your emotional health?
11. Is there any current crisis driving your symptoms just now?
12. Have you had any health concerns in the past?
13. What was your mood and function like in pregnancy and after the birth?
14. What are your usual strengths as a person?
15. Do you have a typical style of coping?
16. Whom do you feel are practical and emotional supports in your life?
17. Do you see yourself as feeling or reacting differently from other women in this situation?
If so, how?
18. Tell me a little bit about your baby. Temperament? Schedule? Challenges?
19. Are you parenting other children? How are they doing?
20. How do you think your connection and comfort with your baby is going?
21. Do you ever have thoughts or impulses that frighten you?
22. Have you ever worried about being a risk to yourself?
23. Have you ever worried about being a risk to others? To the children?
24. Are the risky experiences thoughts or do they feel like impulses to act?
25. Have you ever acted on thoughts of harm to yourself or others?
26. What would you most like help with?
27. What would you keep just the same about yourself?
28. Is there anything you would like to change about yourself?
29. What would help you in your life as a mother just now?
30. Can you run me through your daily routine?

A Postpartum Mother's Checklist ✓

If you are wondering about the state of your mental health, try asking yourself these questions. Maybe bring your responses to your service provider. Together, you can consider the responses that trouble you.

✓	
	Am I acting like myself?
	Am I saying or doing things that seem out of character or not like my usual self?
	Am I too worried, too withdrawn, too talkative, too euphoric, too exhausted, too unhappy, too uninterested, hyper?
	Am I confused?
	Am I crying all the time?
	Am I eating the way I usually do?
	Am I taking care of myself the way I typically do?
	Am I spending time with the baby?
	Am I reacting appropriately to the baby?
	Am I too worried or too detached regarding the baby?
	Am I less interested in things that used to interest me?
	Is my anxiety getting in the way of doing what I need to do?
	Am I preoccupied with worry or fear that seems out of proportion?
	Am I resisting spending time with people who care about me?
	Am I too attentive or concerned with the baby's health?
	Am I having trouble sleeping, even when the baby is sleeping?
	Am I overly concerned with things being done perfectly with no room for mistakes?
	Am I isolating myself though I am fearful of being alone?
	Am I too angry, too irritable, too anxious, or too short-tempered?
	Am I having panic attacks, where I feel I can't breathe or think clearly?



Healthy Thinking Work Sheet

Studies show that 80 to 90 per cent of us experience the types of thoughts that trouble people with anxiety disorders, but most of us are able to dismiss these thoughts without any ongoing problems. In comparison, people with anxiety disorders experience upsetting thoughts, images, or urges on a daily basis. These thoughts do not go away with time and sometimes the thoughts can get distorted.

“Distorted” thoughts seem real, but they aren’t entirely based on the facts. For example, even though an individual knows that she checked the stove, she feels as if she has to return home because she could be wrong and the house could burn down. She might convince herself – against logic – that unless she returns home, something really awful is going to happen.

People with anxiety disorders often feel anxious thoughts pop into their minds even when they don’t want to be thinking about them. The negative thinking patterns that go along with anxiety disorders can also make people feel sad and angry.

If you have anxiety that feels out of control or you’ve been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, use the worksheet on the next page to examine negative thoughts that upset you or hold you back from reaching your potential.

Here are the questions you’ll want to ask yourself:

- **What is my most upsetting thought?**
- **How does that thought get distorted?**
- **How could I challenge that thought distortion?**
- **What does my past experience tell me about this situation?**
- **What do I conclude?**

The worksheet on the next page is for you to fill in. There is an example to help you understand.

Healthy Thinking Work Sheet

Thoughts	Type of distortion	Questions to challenge distortion	Answers
(example) I am a complete failure at everything in my life.	(example) All or nothing	(example) What would my best friend say? Am I ignoring some positive things I've done?	(example) I am really good at some things in my life. Just because I made a mistake or can't do everything really well doesn't mean I am a complete failure.



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