



Connecting with your baby when you are experiencing a mental health issue

When a parent has a mental health issue babies can pick up on a parent's mood and behaviour. This resource helps you to connect with your baby when you are experiencing mental health challenges so that they feel secure and nurtured.

It steps you through:

- Understanding your feelings and behaviours
- Understanding what your baby notices and experiences
- Communicating and connecting with your baby

Understanding your feelings and behaviours

When you understand your mental health challenges, you will be more familiar with how they influence your emotions, behaviour and moods. This will then help you develop an understanding of the impact on you and your child.

Emotions, behaviour and moods influence how you view yourself and how others view you. They also influence your relationships with others, including your baby. An important first step in preparing to think about your mental health issue is to reflect on how it impacts you, the behaviours that your baby sees and hears and how these might influence how your baby feels. You can do this with a partner, a friend, a health professional – or on your own.

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your baby might view what is happening. It might be useful to talk with your health professional or another support person about the impact of your mental health issues on your role as a parent.



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I guess I never really thought about the fact that he could pick up what was going on with me. I thought he was just too little to understand that anything was wrong.

Sarah, parent

A reflective exercise

Do this exercise on a day you are feeling well.

Think about the way your mental health issue impacts on you. Tick the things on the following list of common experiences that you experience. There is additional space for you to list others.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking and moving slowly | <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling to concentrate | <input type="checkbox"/> Very tired |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying a lot | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing or hearing things | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping a lot |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suspicious thoughts | <input type="checkbox"/> Low motivation | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritable, short-tempered |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traumatic flashbacks | <input type="checkbox"/> Not mixing with others | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry outbursts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad or teary | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over-sensitive | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harm | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling numb | |

Are there any others? List these below.

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Write the five things from the list above that worry you the most at the top of the circles below. Focus on those that impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your baby might see, hear and feel when they observe you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles.

<div><p>Feelings and behaviour:</p><p>What does my child see, hear and feel?</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p></div>	<div><p>Feelings and behaviour:</p><p>What does my child see, hear and feel?</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p></div>	<div><p>Feelings and behaviour:</p><p>What does my child see, hear and feel?</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p></div>
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Understanding what your baby notices and experiences

Babies might not understand everything you say, but they are very sensitive and responsive to your emotions and your tone of voice. You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions your baby's responses may also change. What would help them to feel connected with you when you aren't feeling well?

Take time to listen and watch your baby's way of communicating with you. If you are having difficulty reading or understanding their signals, seek advice from your midwife, well child nurse or general practice team. You might find information on the Raising Children Network website helpful (www.raisingchildren.net.au | look for Babies: Connecting and communicating).

Babies: Babies cry and sometimes it can be hard to understand their distress. Your baby will be looking for you to respond.

Parents: Parents can find a distressed or crying baby increases their own stress. When this happens take a moment to try and manage your own feelings before soothing your upset baby. Use a quiet reassuring voice as you move closer to be with your baby.

Your relationship with your baby: Parents may sometimes feel they cannot understand their child's needs. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your baby's needs set a time when you can find someone you trust to be with your baby while

you take a break. You can then use this time to relax or to call the Parent Helpline, talk to a child maternal health nurse or your doctor.

Quick tips for communicating and connecting with your baby:

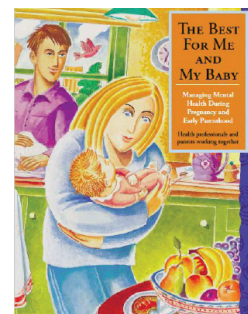
You don't need to explain your mental health issue to your baby, but when you are stressed or not well and with your baby, it is important to find ways to connect with them to help them feel nurtured and secure.

Some tips include:

- Hold your baby close and cuddle them
- Give your baby a massage
- Smile when you look at your baby
- Maintain eye contact with your baby until they look away
- Gently rock your baby and talk in a soothing voice when they are upset
- Use a warm, calm, 'sing-song' voice when you speak to your baby
- Smile and nod when your baby make sounds
- Encourage your baby's little noises by repeating their sounds when they finish their 'sentence' to create your own two-way 'conversation'.

For more information on managing mental health during pregnancy and early parenthood download a copy of the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) Australia booklet *'The Best for Me and My Baby'*.

www.copmi.net.au/me-and-baby



This factsheet was originally prepared by Emerging Minds for the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) national initiative. The COPMI initiative was funded by the Australian Government. It has been adapted for NZ parents by Werry Workforce Whāraurau with the permission and support of Emerging Minds. Publication has been supported by contributions from Matua Raki and Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui.
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