

Preparing for the transition to parenthood

Becoming a mother requires women to adapt to life change at many levels. They often find that this is a time when they re-examine their identity, have to deal with many physical changes of pregnancy and childbirth, adjust to new home or work routines and make space within existing relationships for the new baby.

Becoming confident in being a mother can take some time – to develop skills, to feel comfortable and confident in managing a new baby and to feel more in control.

Although no one can be sure just what their particular experience will be like, it can often be an exciting time with many highs but there will no doubt be some lows as well.

Getting ready for changes

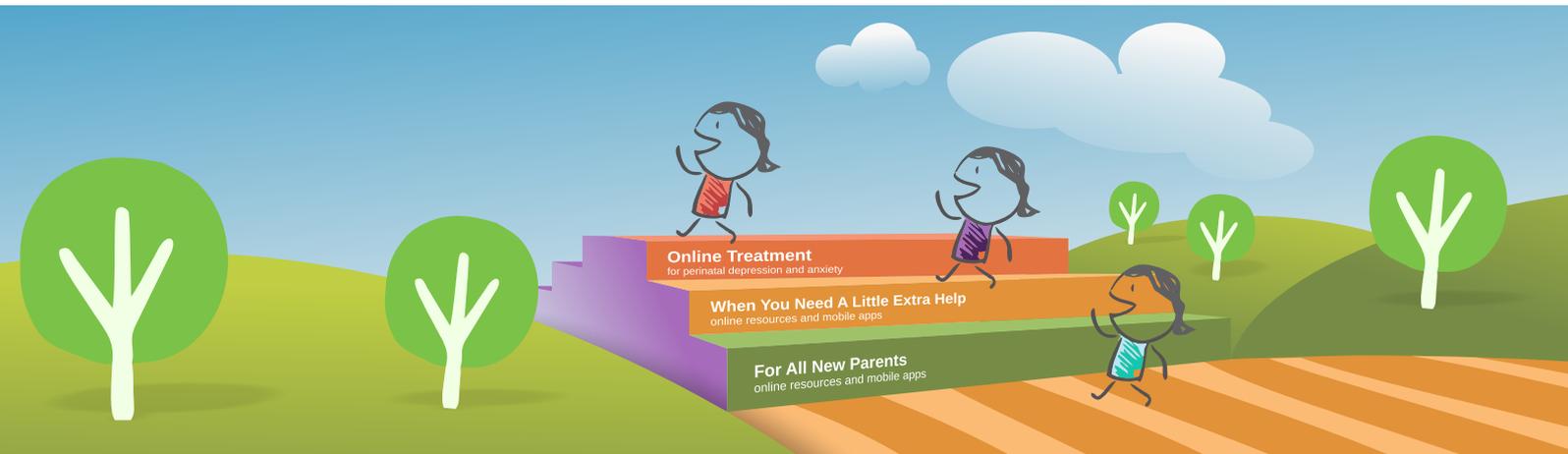
Some of the major changes that you will have to navigate as a new mother include:

- physical changes to your body
- changes to your emotions
- changes to your relationships with your partner and family
- changes to your working life
- changes to your social life
- taking the responsibility for a growing baby, every day.

How easily women adjust to the varied demands of pregnancy and parenthood is different for different women. At times, these challenges can feel stressful and even scary. Common questions and concerns that pregnant women and new mothers have include:

- Is this the right time for me to be having a child?
- How will I cope with childbirth?
- Will I be a “good” mother?
- Will my baby be healthy?
- How will having a new baby impact on my/our lives?

These are all normal concerns. Doing some planning for the changes, finding out about services in your local area, and being ready to access supports will help you with your transition to parenthood.



Expectations of parenthood

Sometimes what we expect can be very different from the reality we experience. The bigger the gap between expectation and reality, the more the adjustment that is required. Speaking to others can be a useful reality check. If things don't go to plan, we need not have feelings that we have somehow failed.

In reality, pregnancy and being a mother during the first year of a new baby's life is often filled by a constant stream of demanding tasks and physical changes. Sleepless nights, feeling tearful, and sometimes just not knowing what to do, are all a part of this. Managing big changes in daily routine, broken sleep, and learning to look after a baby all require enormous physical effort, emotional energy and patience. Not surprisingly many new parents feel fatigued and sometimes find it hard to manage.

What other women have found helpful in the transition to parenthood

- Information about what to expect at the different stages of parenthood.
- Being able to talk frankly and openly about the realities of pregnancy and motherhood.
- Being able to share experiences and feel reassured that you are not alone.
- Having people who will really listen and understand your complex emotions.
- Being in contact with people who encourage you to seek help when needed.
- Having offers of help and feeling able to accept help.
- Realising that taking care of yourself is a vital part of caring for your family.

When expecting a baby, it is helpful to start thinking about and talking to those close to you about the day to day challenges and how to manage these. Once the baby arrives, talking to others, joining in with other new mothers, and sharing experiences can help you adjust. There are community supports for young families in most local communities so you will not be alone. Open communication with partners, friends and families is essential.

Three key messages to remember

1. Asking for and accepting help is a strength: It is a strength to be able to ask for help when you feel that you need it and to be able to accept help when it is offered.

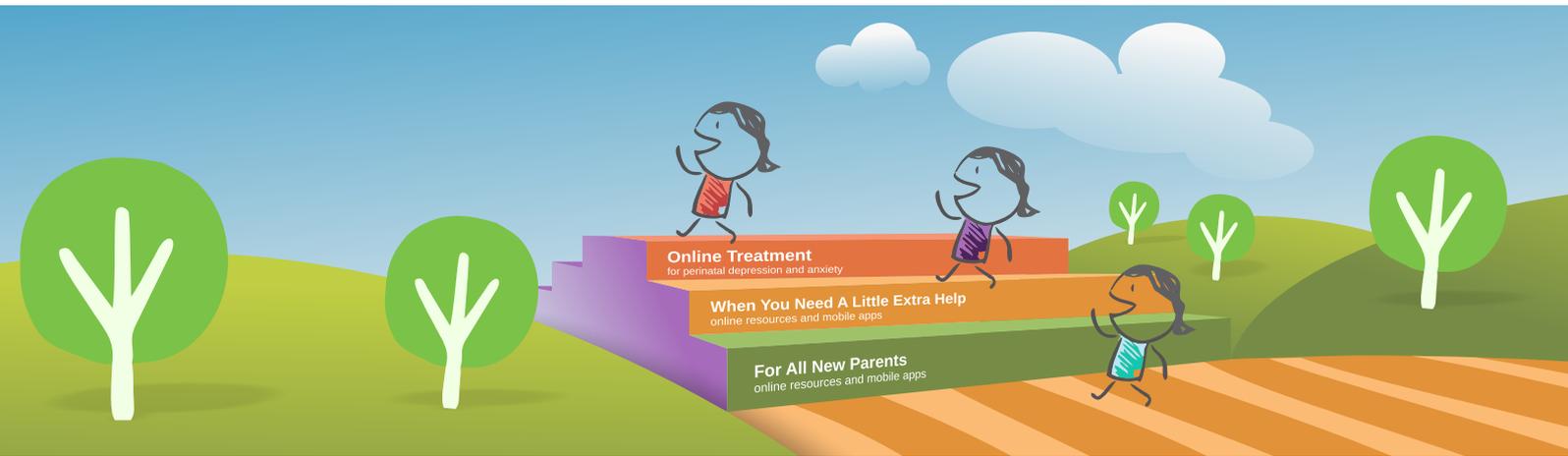
2. Go with the flow: Simply accepting that with a new baby in the house you will have less control over the details of things than you used to can be a relief, take the pressure off, and feel liberating.

Constant change is the reality of early parenthood and doesn't mean you're not keeping up or you're doing it badly! In fact nothing could be further from the truth. Be comfortable with the fact that things don't have to be perfect – the floors don't need to be mopped and the laundry doesn't have to be folded and put away every single day – that's how most people's houses are in reality!

It helps to learn to stay flexible, be a bit open-minded, and expect that changes will happen.

Caring for a new baby requires new knowledge and skills. It is common to feel clumsy and a bit incompetent at the start. Learning these new things and getting to know your baby take time and experience. Over time you will feel more self-confident and competent.

3. Trust yourself: Once you feel able to be realistic about what you can achieve and not overly worried over little things, you will feel more confident in being assertive. When others offer what seems like well-meant but misguided advice – ignore what feels wrong and do what you know is right for you. For example, when you are caring for a new baby, there may be times that you just feel overwhelmed by too many visitors, too much contact from relatives and too much 'free advice'. When you need your own space to be respected, communicating your wishes clearly, calmly and in a positive polite manner will help you get what you need without creating conflict.



Coping Strategies

Here are some of the many ways of preparing for and managing pregnancy, birth and early parenthood that can help you make the most of it and minimise the stresses of adjustment.

Planning ahead – Organising support in the early months can reduce stress. Enlist any family or friends willing to help in specific tasks. Plan to avoid major life changes (moving house, changing jobs)

Feeling supported – Developing a support network of friends, family, health professionals and mother-baby groups can help you a lot, not least by giving you the opportunity to share your experiences. While it can be hard to accept help, it is worth making the most of offers of help from friends and family (including the older generations) and involving your partner in the daily care of your baby right from the beginning.

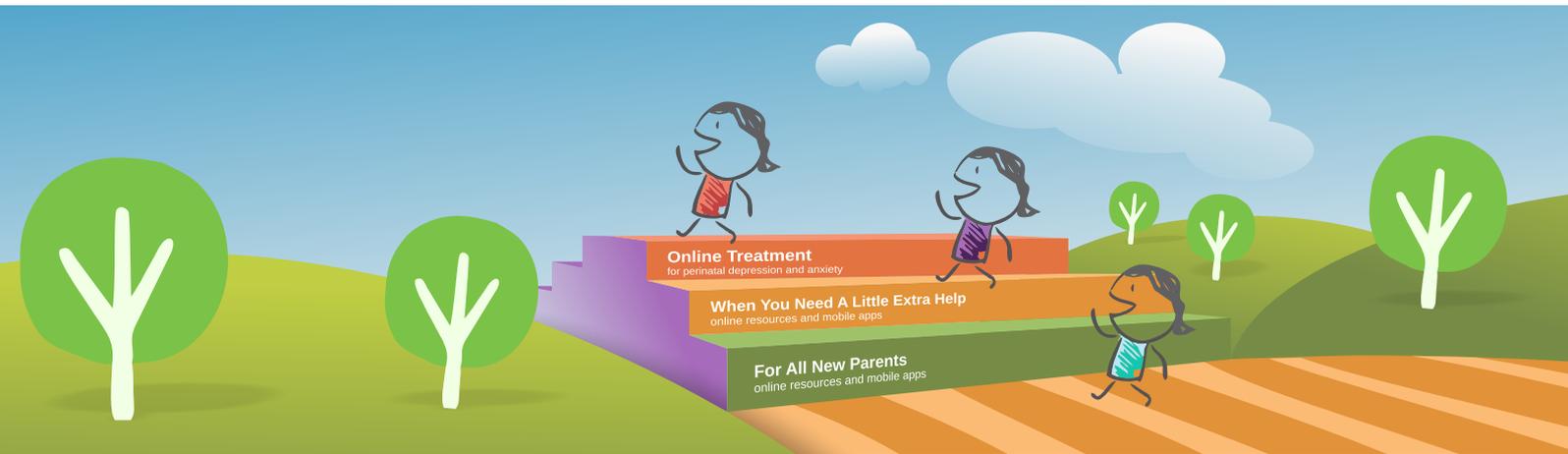
Staying healthy and rested – Try to eat healthy meals, take time to do some exercise and avoid drugs and alcohol. Taking a power nap whenever your baby is sleeping can help you stay physically refreshed and mentally well. Take sleep opportunities when partners, family members and friends are able to help by looking after your baby. When there is so much to do, taking time to just sleep may seem like a challenge but getting enough rest for yourself is important for you and your baby. Learning how to settle your baby into a good sleeping pattern is vitally important. You can find out more about this in the What Were We Thinking website and app.

Managing stress – Keeping a diary of feelings and taking time to look back can help you understand the things that make you feel stressed and plan to do things differently in the future. Learning some breathing and muscle relaxation techniques and letting the people around you know what you are feeling can be positive ways of helping yourself get through the tough times. You can find out more about relaxation in the MindMum App or the MumMoodBooster programs.

Taking time-out – Taking some time out for yourself will help you to recharge your batteries. Once in a while organise friends or family to help with childcare. Use this time to do the things that you enjoy – maybe just some quiet time alone, reading a book, enjoying your favourite music, having a long relaxing soak in the bath, watching a good movie, spending time with your partner or friends, or simply getting some sleep.

Look after your own needs – Your friends and family may want to visit you more often than usual and offer well-meaning advice. Don't feel that you need to entertain endlessly or that you should always take their advice. Discuss your concerns with a health professional, such as at Maternal Child and Family Health Nurse or GP. There is no right or wrong way of parenting. It is all about working out what is right for you and your baby.

Be kind to yourself – It can take time to feel comfortable with your changing body and then parenting a new baby. Don't just focus what you feel you 'should' be doing better. Acknowledge the many things you are already doing well and give yourself time to adjust. You will start to learn how to read and follow your baby's cues. Just by watching and listening in an unhurried way, you will learn from your baby what they need from you and how to respond, and feel more relaxed and confident.



Adjustment: When it all gets too hard and you need extra help

Parenthood is a major life transition and it takes time to adjust. It is entirely normal to feel overwhelmed by parenthood at times. When this happens, confide in someone close that you trust (your partner, close family, a good friend). With a little help most things can be sorted if you share the load. Some problems however, may not be so simple, but helping yourself by sharing your concerns and finding support can help you manage the bigger challenges too. Everyone has some difficulties and at times you will need extra help, or a program of treatment from a trusted resource or health professional.

Up to 1 in 3 women experience mild, or more intense depressive symptoms, adjustment problems and anxiety during pregnancy or the postnatal period. Difficulties with baby's settling, crying and breastfeeding are common and together with other stressors can also feed into a downward spiral if you are feeling sad, low or worried.

Read more on the "Learn about causes and symptoms of perinatal depression" section at MumSpace.com.au

Help Available on MumSpace

Explore the resources on MumSpace. You can find out more about building your confidence as a parent by exploring What Were We Thinking! and Baby Steps. Find out how to deal with the more common emotional problems experienced by lots of new mothers by downloading and using the new MindMum App.

The MumMoodBooster programs offer effective online treatment for pregnant women and new mums experiencing significant depression and anxiety.

All of these resources are free of charge.

More information

MumMoodBooster

Is a simple-to-use evidence-based online CBT treatment for postnatal depression and anxiety. Mum2BMoodBooster is the pregnancy version. Sessions are interactive, tailored to your problems and have been found to be highly effective by many women.

MindMum

MindMum is a mobile phone app to help you cope at times of stress and provides useful tips and ideas to support your emotional wellbeing during pregnancy and after having baby. This can be freely downloaded from MumSpace.

What Were We Thinking!

What Were We Thinking is an Australian website and mobile application that supports new mums and dads in learning? practical skills for settling babies and adjusting to changes in their relationship with each other.

Baby Steps

Baby Steps provides information to parents on caring for baby and themselves to enhance the wellbeing of new mums and dads.

For more information and support, head on over to MumSpace where we are with you, every step of the way.

www.mumspace.com.au