



Your Mental Health Matters!

People often assume that pregnancy and the first few weeks after birth are the happiest moments in a mother's life. Contrary to common belief, this is not a reality for many women. In fact, approximately 10-13% of women worldwide experience mental illness during pregnancy or following childbirth (WHO, 2016) and up to 80% of women go through the "baby blues". In some cases, affected mothers may not function as usual, which in turn may also impact the child's growth and development. Taken together, attention must be paid to the mental health of pregnant and new mothers, given their vulnerabilities and direct impact on children's developmental outcomes.

Your Mental Health is Your Baby's Mental Health!

From conception, you pave the way for your baby's socioemotional development.

- Your baby counts on you to help him/her navigate his/her emotional experiences through *your* responses.
- When you recognize and sensitively respond to your baby when he is distressed, you positively influence his/her mental health, and equip your baby with the right tools for lifelong learning, behaviour, and successful relationships.
- Consistent and sensitive responsiveness to your baby's cues also lets him/her develop trust and feel secure and safe in his/her relationship with you. This type of relationship is key to your baby's functioning in later life.

Making Connections with Your Baby!

The experiences you share with your baby lay the foundation for his/her brain development from conception through to adulthood.

- From the moment your baby is born, his/her brain is capable of making over 700 neural connections every second!
- By responding and spending time with your baby, you help create those new connections in his/her brain, but also help to strengthen existing ones.
- Your ability to respond consistently and sensitively is largely influenced by your own mental health. Happy and non-stressed mothers are more likely to build these connections through attuned caregiving and positive interactions!

Stress can take a Toll!

Stress during pregnancy can have implications on fetal development, which is likely to have lasting effects on development in the later years.

- When you are stressed, your body transmits stress chemicals and hormones to your baby as well.
- Chronic stress can influence how you soothe and respond to your baby, as well as the quality of interactions with your baby. Consistent patterns of positive serve and return interactions are essential to the growth and development of your baby's brain.
- It is important to be aware of, and continuously monitor your own thoughts and feelings – a stress-free mother makes for a happy and healthy baby!
- If you notice that your stress is becoming difficult to manage, it is important to take the right steps to curb your overload mode – take a break, confide in someone you trust, seek professional support, exercise, or practice mindfulness! By taking care of yourself, you'll also be taking care of your baby!

In a Nutshell...

- Your mental health is just as important as your baby's!
- Your baby is aware of your mental health, and learns from your cues – positive, comforting responses to his/her needs are essential for positive developmental outcomes.
- At the same time, you can't expect to provide your baby with responsive, sensitive, and attuned care 100% of the time – it takes an imperfect mother to raise a child well! Good-enough parenting is the aim, so allow yourself a moment to sit back and enjoy the joys and trials of being a mother!
- If you are having strong negative feelings about your baby, it is important to talk to a doctor or another caring professional.