

Baby blues, emotionality and depression in new parents

The birth of a baby is a major life change. As a new parent, you become emotionally open, and this openness makes you sensitive to your child's emotions and needs. But it also makes you vulnerable.

Approximately one in ten parents will experience a period of depressive symptoms during the child's first year. These symptoms may even begin during pregnancy. Depressive symptoms are temporary and can be alleviated by talking to someone and getting some rest and understanding. Depression is a more serious condition that needs to be addressed with psychological or medical treatment. Children are affected by their parents' emotional status. Therefore, it is important to seek help if you suffer as a new parent. Talking to the nurse at the child healthcare centre (BVC) is a good first step if you're not feeling well.

What are "The baby blues"?

The term "baby blues" refers to a common, short-lived form of low mood and emotionality that usually occurs a few days after childbirth. It is characterized by emotionality and mood swings. In one moment, you feel happy and strong, in the next you cry for no particular reason. Such tearfulness and emotional mood swings are linked both to the major change in life and to hormonal factors (and yes, dads are also hormonally affected by being with their newborn babies!).

What is depression and what are depressive symptoms?

Most new parents sometimes feel inadequate. It is normal to feel mentally and physically exhausted when you have a new baby. But if the dark thoughts linger for a longer period of time they may be symptoms of depression. Depression affects your self confidence, makes you feel inadequate and worthless and affects your ability to concentrate. You become anxious, irritable and short-tempered, feel restless or empty. The feelings may prevent you from enjoying your baby and lead to isolation. If you feel this way, it is important that you talk with someone you trust, even if you don't perceive your feelings as intense. Talking to your partner or the child healthcare nurse can ease your burden.

Who can be affected?

Anyone can suffer from depression or mood swings. But the risk is higher if you have previously suffered from depression or other mental illness, have experienced difficulties in life, have poor support around you or otherwise feel under pressure.

How can you counteract depressive symptoms?

Children are affected when you don't feel well as a parent. You have less energy and joy when you interact with your baby. So it's important to find help to make you feel better. Routines can help. It is important to eat regularly, rest, sleep, to have social interaction and get some physical exercise. It may seem impossible to set up such routines as a new parent, but it is important for your wellbeing. It is also important to tell someone how you are feeling. It is difficult to stick to routines and prevent negative thoughts when depression is draining your energy and occupying your thoughts. So it is important to get help and support from others. Sometimes parents are ashamed of their low mood and keep their dark thoughts to themselves. But we know that it can be a great relief to talk about them.

So, if you feel down anxious, talk to your nurse at the BVC, your partner, a friend or a relative. Even if you are experiencing intense emotions, you may feel better after just a few chats. Sometimes, it may also be helpful to get psychological treatment, or to take anti-depressant medication. If you are suffering from depression as a new parent, you can take full or partial sick leave from your parental leave. If you have a co-parent, the other parent can go on parental leave while you recover. If you are a single parent and go on sick leave, the extended temporary parental allowance gives your relative the right to temporary parental allowance.

Low mood screening at BVC

You can always talk to the nurse at the BVC about how you are feeling. As a birth mother, you will have the opportunity to complete a questionnaire (EPDS) when your child is 6-8 weeks old. These questions ask about how you have been feeling emotionally during the past week. When you have completed the questionnaire, you and the child healthcare nurse will talk about your feelings. If necessary, you can get support and meet the nurse again for further talks, or you will be helped to get a referral for other treatment. As a father or a non-birth mother, you are invited to a visit when your child is 3-5 months old. At this visit you and the child healthcare nurse will talk about your feelings, and about your parenting. If you need further help, you can get support from the nurse or a referral for other treatment.