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Sandwell and West Birmingham

NHS Trust

Coronavirus (Covid-19)

Managing Anxiety in the Perinatal period

Information and advice for patients/ parents and carers/ visitors/ mums-to-be/ new mums/ families



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Maternity Services

Understanding anxiety:

It's important to remember that feeling anxious, worried, or stressed is perfectly normal during these difficult times. Fear and anxiety are a normal human response to threat, designed to keep us safe – it does not mean that there is something wrong with us. It's the tricky nature of how our brains function.

If you are pregnant, or have recently had a baby, it is reasonable to expect that you might be feeling more anxious than usual – not only is your brain trying to keep you safe, but it is trying to keep your baby safe too.

When we are faced with high levels of uncertainty about what the future might hold, fear and anxiety can spiral out of control, especially if you already experience high anxiety.

It is normal to experience feelings of anxiety and panic, for your heart to be racing, your breathing more rapid/shallow, to experience fatigue, concentration and sleep difficulties. You might find yourself preoccupied and overwhelmed with thoughts of contamination, 'what if's' and fear bad things happening.

When we feel anxious, it is easy for us to perceive things as more dangerous and think that we are less able to cope. However, when we test this out, we usually learn that most people manage better than they think they will.

Be kind to yourself and those around you at this time. Don't be ashamed for the way that you are feeling. Recognising your feelings rather than tucking them away can help to reduce stress.

Helpful links:

- COVID information for the public from the government:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>
- Royal College of Obstetricians evidence-based information for pregnant women: <https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/guidelines-research-services/guidelines/coronavirus-pregnancy/covid-19-virus-infection-and-pregnancy/>
- MIND – managing your mental health: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- Rethink – practical advice for managing your mental health and support for carers: <https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/covid-19-support/>
- OCD-UK – helpful tips for managing OCD & anxiety:
<https://www.ocduk.org/ocd-and-coronavirus-top-tips/>
- Talking to children about coronavirus:
<https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2020/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-children-families-and-professionals/>
<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>

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Perinatal Psychology team, Community Perinatal Mental Health Services, South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

- Focus on the present moment – when we feel anxious it's easy for us to be focused in the past or the future.
 - Use your breathing to anchor you in the present moment.
 - Use your senses to notice (5,4,3,2,1):
- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can feel
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste
- Be kind to yourself - acknowledge that this is hard, the way you are feeling is not your fault. Ask yourself what you need right now, in this very moment? What can you do to help yourself? In what ways can you use the help of others?

What keeps anxiety going?

It can be helpful to understand that when we feel anxious or worried, we can get drawn into various different ways of being that can feel helpful in the short-term, but actually help to maintain the way that we are feeling in the long term.

For example:

- Getting caught up in negative thoughts and worries
- Focusing on the way we are physically feeling, sensations, and possible symptoms (& searching for these in others)
- Looking up symptoms of coronavirus
- Watching the news
- Preoccupation with social media
- Searching for 'certainty', things that make us feel better
- Planning & preparing for worst-case scenarios
- Seeking reassurance from others

What might help?

Notice how you are feeling & remember it is normal to be feeling more anxious at the moment.

Consider the ways that anxiety is pulling you into thinking and behaving – is there anything that you could test out to try and manage your anxiety?

Limiting information searching & checking:

- Limiting the information you see and hear about coronavirus. Searching for information can feel reassuring in the short term, and a way of trying to make things feel less uncertain, but in the long term increases anxiety.
 - Switch off news notifications
 - Limit google time
 - Limit social media scrolling
 - Use only good fact-based sources of information (e.g. NHS website, gov.uk)
- Resist the urge to check for information – can you delay the urge to check?
 - Put down your phone/turn off the TV, take some deep breaths
 - Distract yourself for at least 10 minutes with an activity you enjoy.
 - If you really need to check – choose a specific time and be strict with yourself. Never check before bed. Set a timer to limit the time you are checking.
- Catch catastrophising – counteract worst-case thinking with evidence-based facts from reliable sources.

Setting boundaries:

- Follow health advice but do no more – for example, wash your hands for 20 seconds and stick to this.
- Give yourself permission to limit or end conversations that create anxiety (e.g. I'm really sorry but I find talking about this doesn't help me right now)

Positive activities & distraction:

- Focus on the things you can control – like your own self-care, good hygiene, things you find enjoyable, using additional time, connecting with other people
- Continue to do things that create positive feelings, joy and relaxation (& be creative about new ways of doing this if you can't do what you would normally, including with your baby).
- Start and end your day with a positive activity – don't immediately check the news or your phone when you wake up.

Sharing with others:

- Talk through your anxieties with someone sensible you trust – extra brain space can help think about things in a different way. However, notice if you are seeking reassurance. Set limits with the people close to you to try not to give you the reassurance that your brain is craving.
- Talk about other things too – it is important that we take time to shift our focus away from the things we are anxious about.

Breathing & present moment focus:

- Focus on your breathing – when you feel anxious you might notice that your breathing becomes more rapid and shallow. If you can slow this down, it will send a signal to your brain to reduce the sense of threat. You could try:
 - Breathing in as you count to 3, then breathe out as you count to 5.
 - Place the finger of one of your hands at the bottom of the thumb of your other hand and use this as a guide. As you trace your finger up your thumb, breathe in, and as you trace your finger back down the other side of your thumb, breathe out. Then as you trace your finger up your finger, breathe in, and out again as you move back down. Repeat this across your 5 fingers.