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PSYCHOLOGY

# The Perinatal Mental Health Cheat Sheet



The perinatal period—spanning pregnancy and the first year after childbirth—brings significant changes, challenges, and rewards. For both first-time mothers and those welcoming new children into their families, it's important to nurture your mental health during this transition. This resource is designed to offer practical advice and strategies for new and seasoned moms alike to help navigate the emotional, physical, and psychological shifts during this time.

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## The Shift in Identity: Embracing All Parts of You

Whether you're a first-time mom or adding to your family, the identity shift that comes with motherhood can be profound. For first-time moms, this shift may involve grief over the life you had before—social gatherings, career pursuits, or simply the freedom to do as you wish. For moms with other children, the transition may come with the grief of adjusting to a new family dynamic and balancing the needs of multiple children.

Grief is a common and natural response during this period, and it doesn't make you a "bad mom." It's an acknowledgment of the many roles and identities you're juggling. While your role as a mother is central, you remain the person you were before—someone with passions, career goals, friendships, and interests beyond parenting.

It's important to honor and prioritize these parts of yourself. Your well-being depends on the ability to stay connected to the full scope of your identity. Finding time for self-care, hobbies, or work outside of motherhood can help you maintain balance and avoid burnout. You are allowed to be more than just a mother—embracing this complexity will ultimately make you a more fulfilled and present parent.

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## Setting Boundaries: Empowering Yourself and Your Family

Setting boundaries is critical for both first-time and seasoned moms. It's easy to feel like you have to meet everyone's needs from your baby to your partner, other children, and extended family members. However, without clear boundaries, it's easy to become depleted, both emotionally and physically. Boundary-setting is not about being rigid or unkind; it's about protecting your well-being and ensuring you have the space you need to care for yourself and your family.

# DEAR MAN

One of the most effective tools for boundary-setting is the DEAR MAN skill, which helps you assert your needs while respecting the needs of others:

- Describe the situation (Describe the situation using only facts).
- Express how you feel about it (e.g., “I’m feeling overwhelmed”).
- Assert your needs or preferences (e.g., “I need time for myself”).
- Reinforce the positive impact (e.g., “When I take time for myself, I’m more present and energized for you”).
- Mindful (stay focused on the issue at hand).
- Appear confident (use calm, clear communication).
- Negotiate if needed (remain open to finding solutions).

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Additionally, [asking permission vs. setting a boundary](#) is something many women struggle with. Women are often socialized to seek permission rather than assert their needs. Setting boundaries requires us to step away from the people-pleasing mindset. It’s natural to feel uncomfortable or guilty, and the people we are setting boundaries with may feel inconvenienced or act annoyed. This is okay—it doesn’t mean the boundary isn’t important. It simply reflects their adjustment to the new dynamic. Boundary-setting is an essential act of self-respect. When you honor your own needs, you set a model for others in your life to do the same.

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## Perfectionism and Mental Health: Striving for Good Enough

Perfectionism can be a major risk factor for mental health concerns during the perinatal period. The pressure to meet societal expectations of motherhood—especially the idea of [intensive mothering](#)—can create immense stress. Intensive mothering is a societal construct rooted in patriarchy and capitalism. It demands that mothers dedicate themselves entirely to their children, often at the cost of their own wellbeing. This pressure is not only unrealistic but can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

The good news is that pushing back against this narrative is not only healthy, but it’s also a form of resistance. By rejecting the idea that you must be perfect or sacrifice everything for your children, you’re actively challenging systems that uphold unrealistic standards. One way to shift your mindset is to embrace the concept of the [good enough mother](#). This idea encourages mothers to aim for balance—doing your best, but accepting that perfection is not the goal. Children don’t need a perfect parent; they need a present, loving, and real parent.

By striving for balance and prioritizing our own wellbeing, we are modelling behaviours that teach our children how to take care of themselves in healthy, sustainable ways. Research consistently shows that children learn how to care for themselves and set boundaries by observing their caregivers. When we model **good enough mothering**, we are showing our children that it's okay to make mistakes, to rest, and to take time for self-care without feeling guilty. This allows children to develop a sense of self-worth and resilience, learning that they are deserving of time and space for their own wellbeing. In contrast, when we engage in excessive self-sacrifice or strive for perfection, we inadvertently teach our children that their needs come second or that personal care and rest are not priorities. This can create a pattern of self-neglect that they may carry into adulthood.



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### Strategies to Address Perfectionism:

- Challenge unrealistic expectations: Reframe perfectionism by focusing on what is achievable in the moment. Celebrate progress, not perfection.
- Practice self-compassion: Treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer a friend. Remember, mistakes are part of learning.
- Real self-care: True self-care goes beyond surface-level activities like bubble baths or facials. Real self-care involves tending to your physical, emotional, and mental health in ways that nourish your overall wellbeing—whether that's asking for help, seeking therapy, or carving out time for activities that truly replenish you.


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## Recognizing Symptoms of Perinatal Anxiety and Depression

Perinatal anxiety and depression are not uncommon, and it's important to recognize their symptoms early. While some anxiety and mood changes are normal during the transition to motherhood, there are warning signs that should not be ignored.

## Symptoms of perinatal anxiety can include:

- Constant worry or feeling overwhelmed.
- Difficulty relaxing or focusing.
- Racing thoughts or persistent fears about the baby's wellbeing.
- Physical symptoms like heart palpitations or shortness of breath.
- Intrusive thoughts: These can include distressing thoughts about harming your baby or fears that something bad will happen to them.



It's important to note that these thoughts are ego-dystonic, meaning they are out of alignment with your true self and values. They cause distress because they conflict with your normal self-image. Research shows that intrusive thoughts are relatively common in postpartum moms, and experiencing them doesn't mean you will act on them. What matters is the ability to recognize them as just thoughts, not realities.

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## Symptoms of perinatal depression may include:

- Persistent sadness or hopelessness.
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed.
- Difficulty bonding with your baby.
- Thoughts of harming yourself or your baby (i.e., not an ego-dystonic thought, rather one associated with a sense of overwhelm or hopelessness)



If you experience these, seek help immediately.

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## Partner Involvement in Supporting Mental Health

- **Share the load:** Both parents should share household responsibilities and baby care. A partner who actively participates in raising the child helps reduce feelings of isolation or resentment.
- **Create open communication:** The transition to parenthood can create stress and strain on relationships. Regularly communicate with your partner about how you're both doing emotionally and physically.
- **Support one another's mental health:** It's important to encourage your partner to express their needs and seek support if necessary. Parenting is a team effort, and fostering an atmosphere of mutual care is vital.

# Additional Perinatal Mental Health Resources

- Postpartum Support International (PSI): This organization provides information, support, and resources for those experiencing perinatal mental health concerns. Visit their website for guidance and local support groups: <https://www.postpartum.net>
- Momwell: Momwell offers podcasts, articles, and online support specifically designed for new parents. It's a great resource to help navigate the mental health challenges of the perinatal period: <https://www.momwell.com>
- Mamas Matter: Offers perinatal mental health support, resources, and advocacy. Visit: <https://www.mamasmatter.org>
- Black Mamas Matter Alliance: Focuses on the health and wellbeing of Black mothers. Visit: <https://www.blackmamasmatter.org>
- Raising Resilience: Offers free resources and support for parents managing mental health concerns. Visit: <https://www.raisingresilience.org>
- For a directory of psychologists in Manitoba, visit: [www.mps.ca](http://www.mps.ca)

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Taking care of your mental health during the perinatal period is not just important for you, but also for your baby and family. By setting boundaries, challenging unrealistic expectations, and seeking support when needed, you can create a more fulfilling and connected experience for yourself as you navigate the beautiful journey of motherhood. You don't have to be perfect—just be real and good enough. **You are enough.**

Remember, you don't have to navigate this journey alone.  
If you need additional support, reach out.