



# THE MOTHER'S **COMPASS**

**A guide to well-being for parents**

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## **PREFACE**

Meet Clara, a 32-year-old woman who always envisioned motherhood as a dream come true. When she welcomed her daughter, Mia, into the world, she felt an overwhelming sense of love. Yet, as the days wore on, something didn't feel right. Clara felt trapped in a fog of anxiety and disconnection. Tasks she thought would come naturally seemed impossible. At times, she wondered if something was wrong with her. Like many new mothers, Clara was unknowingly battling postpartum depression (PPD).

Postpartum depression is a common yet often misunderstood condition that affects 1 in 7 women globally. In countries like Nigeria, where support systems may be limited, the situation is even more urgent. Many mothers silently suffer due to the stigma surrounding mental health, unaware of the help that's available. The consequences of untreated PPD can affect not just the mother, but also the child, leading to issues like impaired bonding and, in extreme cases, neglect or violence.

Thankfully, Clara reached out to a mental health professional. With therapy, support, and patience, she gradually began to reclaim her sense of self. By learning coping strategies and embracing self-care, Clara was able to re-establish her connection with Mia. Her recovery story serves as a reminder of the power of seeking help and the importance of mental health support for mothers.

## **The Mother's Compass: A Guide to Well-being for Parents**

is your essential companion for navigating the rollercoaster of parenting while staying true to your own mental and emotional health. This guide shows you why your well-being is crucial, not just for you, but for the entire family. Packed with practical tips on balancing the demands of parenthood with personal time, managing stress, and building stronger relationships, it empowers you to take control of your own wellness. With strategies for boosting resilience and emotional intelligence, both for you and your children, **The Mother's Compass** helps you nurture yourself as you nurture your family, leading to a more balanced, harmonious, and fulfilling life.

## **BREAKING THE SILENCE**

Through greater awareness and open conversations about perinatal mental health, we can break the stigma, empower mothers, and create a community of support. We all have a role to play in improving maternal health outcomes, and that starts with recognizing the signs, seeking help, and lifting each other up.

## **OVERVIEW OF ‘THE MOTHER’S COMPASS’**

*The Mother’s Compass* is your personal guide through the ups and downs of pregnancy, childbirth, and early motherhood. This book is designed to help you understand and navigate the emotional, physical, and psychological changes that come with this transformative period.

## **KEY THEMES**

**Mental Health:** Tackling the most common mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, and postpartum mood disorders.

**Self-Care:** The importance of sleep, nutrition, exercise, and stress management during the perinatal period.

**Building Strong Relationships:** Understanding how relationships with your partner, family, and friends impact maternal well-being.

**Seeking Professional Help:** The vital role of therapy, medication, and support groups in maintaining mental health during this time.

The book is divided into four key parts to help guide you through your journey:

**Part ONE: Getting Ready for the Adventure of Parenthood**

**Chapter 1:** Emotions on a Rollercoaster: Navigating Pregnancy's Highs and Lows

**Chapter 2:** Nurturing Your Mental Health During Pregnancy and Postpartum: Prioritizing Self-Care: The Power of Sleep, Nutrition, and Exercise

**Part TWO: The Post-Baby Journey: Surprises and Support**

**Chapter 3:** The postpartum body and mind- Navigating the changes

**Chapter 4:** Managing your mental health after a perinatal diagnosis-When Worry Takes Over – Understanding Perinatal OCD

**Chapter 5:** Building a Strong Bond with Your Baby

**Part THREE: Growing and Thriving with Your Baby**

**Chapter 6:** Building a Strong Support Network: A Different Perspective on Connection and Community in Parenthood  
The Essential Role of Connection for New Parents

**Chapter 7:** From Bottle to Breast (and Everything in Between): A Guide to Happy, Healthy Feeding

**Part FOUR: Forward with Hope**

**Chapter 8:** Understanding Your Child's Developmental Milestones  
-A Guide for Parents

**Part FIVE: A brighter future**

**Chapter 9:** Hope and Healing – Overcoming Challenges and Building Resilience

# **Part ONE:**

## **Getting Ready for the Adventure of Parenthood**



# CHAPTER ONE

## **THE EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER OF PREGNANCY: Navigating Pregnancy's Highs and Lows**





## **THE EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER OF PREGNANCY: Navigating Pregnancy's Highs and Lows**

**P**regnancy is often associated with joy, but it can also bring emotional shifts. There are days of pure joy and excitement, but there may also be moments of anxiety, sadness, or even a sense of disconnect. These emotional ups and downs are entirely normal and are part of the unique journey that every expectant parent experiences. This chapter explores the emotional and hormonal shifts expectant mothers experience and offers practical strategies for managing them.

### **THE SPECTRUM OF EMOTIONS**

**Joy and Anticipation:** The thought of welcoming your child fills you with happiness and excitement. Every milestone feels like a dream coming true.

**Anxiety and Fear:** Questions about the health of your baby, the unknowns of childbirth, and your ability to be a good parent can overshadow the joy.

**Sadness and Mood Swings:** Hormonal changes can cause unpredictable emotional shifts, sometimes leaving you feeling irritable or weepy.

**Overwhelm and Fatigue:** The physical changes and preparations for parenthood can leave you exhausted and anxious about how you'll manage.



Sophie, a first-time mother, experienced the full spectrum of emotions during her pregnancy. While she was ecstatic about becoming a mother, anxiety crept in about the delivery and the future. As her pregnancy progressed, she began to experience more frequent mood swings and bouts of sadness. Talking to her partner and friends helped her feel understood and reassured that these emotions were part of the process.

## **UNDERSTANDING YOUR EMOTIONS**

Navigating the emotional ups and downs of pregnancy can be challenging, but these steps can help you along the way:

**Acknowledge Your Feelings:** Allow yourself to experience both the highs and the lows without judgment.

**Practice Self-Compassion:** Be kind to yourself. It's okay to feel unsure or overwhelmed.

**Communicate Openly:** Sharing your emotions with loved

ones or a support network can ease the burden.

**Seek Professional Help:** If your emotions feel overwhelming, a mental health professional can offer guidance and support.

## **CULTURAL CONTEXT**

In many cultures, including Nigerian, emotional shifts during pregnancy are often met with the support of extended family or religious communities. For instance, close family members may provide comfort and guidance, helping alleviate feelings of isolation.

## **HOW TO COPE WITH EMOTIONAL SHIFTS DURING PREGNANCY (J.O.Y.)**

**J for Journal:** Write down your thoughts and feelings each day.

**O for Observe:** Take note of your emotional highs and lows, paying attention to patterns.

**Y for You:** Focus on self-care, prioritizing your well-being and seeking help when needed.

## **HORMONAL HARMONY: NAVIGATING MOOD SWINGS**

Pregnancy brings significant hormonal changes that influence not only your body but your mood as well. Understanding these hormonal shifts can help you feel more in control during the emotional ups and downs.

### **HORMONAL INFLUENCES ON MOOD**

In addition to oestrogen and progesterone, which regulate pregnancy but also trigger mood swings, oxytocin levels rise, helping with bonding with the baby. However, oxytocin can also contribute to feelings of overwhelm during hormonal shifts. Additionally, changes in cortisol and serotonin levels can disrupt sleep and affect mood stability.

*Research shows that hormonal fluctuations in pregnancy, including oxytocin, progesterone, and cortisol, have been linked to mood disturbances (Source: "Pregnancy and Mood Disorders: A Review of Hormonal Influence," Journal of Maternal-Fetal & Neonatal Medicine, 2020).*

### **Tips for Managing Hormonal Mood Swings:**

**Prioritize Sleep:** A good night's sleep can help regulate hormones and improve mood. Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep.

**Practice Stress Management:** Techniques like meditation, mindfulness, and yoga can help reduce anxiety.

**Eat a Balanced Diet:** A healthy diet supports hormonal balance.

Focus on whole foods, fruits, and vegetables.

**Stay Hydrated:** Drinking water can prevent dehydration and help maintain mood stability.

**Seek Professional Help:** If mood swings feel unmanageable, don't hesitate to consult a healthcare provider or mental health expert.

## **MAKING IT MORE PRACTICAL (S.L.E.E.P.)**

**S** for Sleep: Prioritize 7-9 hours of rest each night to regulate your hormones.

**L** for Lifestyle: Practice stress-reduction techniques like mindfulness and yoga.

**E** for Eat: Choose a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

**E** for Exercise: Regular exercise can help stabilize your mood.

**P** for Professional Help: Seek help if mood swings become overwhelming.



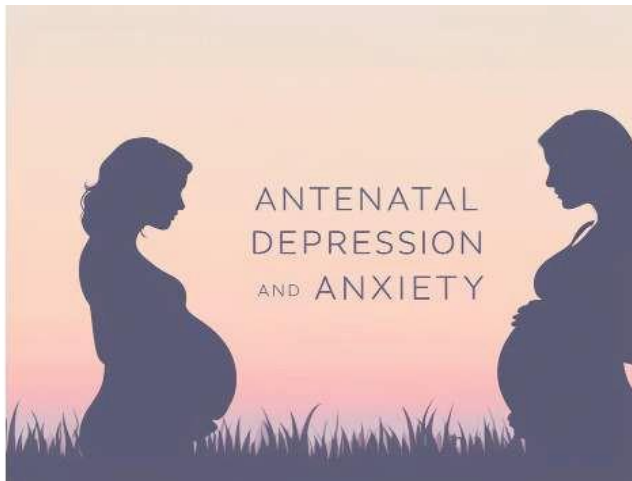
## **RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF ANTENATAL DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY**

It's common for women to experience some form of emotional difficulty during pregnancy, including symptoms of antenatal depression and anxiety. According to the World Health Organization, up to 20% of women worldwide experience mental health disorders during pregnancy, including depression and anxiety (Source: WHO, 2019). Recognizing the signs early can help you seek the support you need.

## **COMMON SYMPTOMS OF ANTENATAL DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY:**

- Persistent sadness feelings of emptiness
- Excessive crying
- Difficulty bonding with your baby

- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Fatigue
- Irritability or mood swings Anxiety, panic attacks  
Trouble concentrating
- Thoughts of harming yourself.



## **SOPHIE'S STORY**

During her pregnancy, Sophie felt a constant sense of dread and worry. She was overwhelmed by the thought of becoming a mother and struggled with feelings of sadness and isolation. She found it hard to connect with her baby and even began to question whether she would be able to handle motherhood. Sophie noticed that she was frequently tearful, couldn't sleep, and had little appetite. Realizing that these feelings weren't normal, she reached out to her healthcare provider. With support and the right resources, Sophie began

to manage her anxiety and depression, feeling more confident and connected as her pregnancy progressed.

### **Tips for Recognizing the Signs:**

**Pay Attention to Your Feelings:** Notice any significant changes in your mood or behaviour. Are you feeling more anxious, sad, or overwhelmed than usual?

**Talk to Your Healthcare Provider:** Don't hesitate to share your feelings with your doctor or midwife. They can help assess whether what you're experiencing is within the normal range or if further support is needed.

**Trust Your Instincts:** If something feels off, it's important to seek help. Antenatal depression and anxiety are treatable, and getting help early can improve your well-being and that of your baby.

**Connect with Other Mothers:** Talking to other mothers who may be experiencing similar feelings can provide validation and support.

Sometimes, just knowing you're not alone can be incredibly helpful.

### **Domestic Abuse and Perinatal Depression**

Domestic abuse is a significant risk factor for perinatal depression, with studies showing that women experiencing violence during pregnancy are twice as likely to develop



depressive symptoms. Abuse may include physical, emotional, sexual, or financial harm and often worsens during the perinatal period, a time when women are more vulnerable due to physical changes, hormonal fluctuations, and emotional stress.

In abusive relationships, victims may feel isolated, unsupported, and fearful, compounding their risk of depression. For instance, an abusive partner might undermine a woman's parenting confidence, control access to healthcare, or use pregnancy as a tool for manipulation. According to WHO, 1 in 3 women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence, and pregnancy does not offer immunity (World Health Organization, 2021).

In Nigeria, cultural norms and stigma surrounding domestic violence often silence victims, making it harder for them to seek help. According to Ameh, N., & Abdul, M. A. (2004) Research from Nigeria highlights that approximately 10% of pregnant women report intimate partner violence, though the true prevalence is likely higher due to underreporting.

For victims, addressing abuse and seeking support are critical to improving maternal mental health. Healthcare providers play a key role in screening for domestic violence and connecting women to safe housing, counselling, and social support networks. Recognizing the link between abuse and perinatal depression can help create a safer and healthier environment for mothers and their children.

If you are experiencing domestic abuse, know that help is available. Speak with your healthcare provider, and reach out to organizations that can support you in finding safety and healing.

In Nigeria, several resources are available for victims of domestic abuse. Here are two key hotlines you can contact for support:

**Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA)**

○ Hotline: 08000-333-333

○ Website: [lagosdsva.org](https://lagosdsva.org)

This agency provides support, counselling, and advocacy for

survivors of domestic and sexual violence. They also manage shelters and coordinate emergency responses in Lagos State.

**Mirabel Centre Helpline**

○ Hotline: 08155770000

○ Website: <https://mirabelcentre.org/>

The Mirabel Centre offers free psychosocial counselling and support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence, both in-person and remotely.

These hotlines are free and confidential, and staff are trained to listen and provide guidance tailored to individual needs. If you're in a situation of domestic violence, reaching out can provide access to critical resources, emotional support, and safe accommodations if necessary.

## **A GUIDE FOR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IN PREGNANCY (S.A.F.E.)**

S.A.F.E. is a helpful mnemonic to guide you in managing your emotional well-being during pregnancy, especially when it comes to recognizing the signs of antenatal depression and anxiety:

**S** for Support: Don't hesitate to reach out to a loved one or a professional for support. Whether it's your partner, a close friend, or a healthcare provider, having a support system is key.

**A** for Assess: Reflect on your emotional state. Are you noticing patterns in your mood or behaviour? If something feels off, take note of it.

**F** for Feel: Understand that your feelings are valid. It's okay to feel anxious, sad, or overwhelmed during pregnancy. Seeking help is a strength, not a weakness.

**E** for Empower: Trust in your ability to ask for help. By seeking support, you're taking necessary steps to ensure both your mental health and the well-being of your baby.

By recognizing the signs of antenatal depression and anxiety

early and taking proactive steps, you can manage your mental health during pregnancy with the help of your support system and healthcare providers.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**



The emotional journey of pregnancy can be challenging, but it's important to recognize that it's normal to experience both high and low emotions. Whether it's hormonal mood swings, feelings of overwhelm, or the fear of the unknown, acknowledging and addressing these emotions is key to maintaining your mental health. By practicing self-compassion, reaching out for support, and learning more about how hormones impact mood, you can take proactive steps to care for yourself during this special, yet sometimes difficult, time.

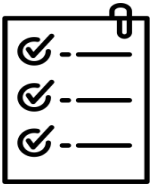
# WORKSHEETS FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

## INTRODUCTION:

Pregnancy can be a time of excitement, but it can also bring emotional challenges, including antenatal anxiety and depression.

These worksheets are designed to help you recognize early signs of emotional distress, understand and manage your mental health, and build a supportive environment.

Keep in mind that these worksheets serve as self-reflection tools. A more detailed screening for antenatal anxiety and depression is necessary for diagnosis, and this should be conducted by your healthcare provider.



## **Worksheet 1: Emotional Check-In (J.O.Y.)**

**Purpose:** This exercise helps you stay mindful of your emotional state during pregnancy. Regular emotional check-ins can help you process your feelings and recognize when you might need support.

**Instructions:** Take a few minutes each day to reflect on your emotions. Use the J.O.Y. mnemonic to guide your journaling.

**J.O.Y.**

**J** for Journal: Write down your thoughts and feelings each day. Try to capture both positive and negative emotions.

Example: "Today I felt excited about the baby, but also anxious about how I will manage everything."

**O** for Observe: Take note of your emotional highs and lows, paying attention to patterns.

Example: "I've noticed that I feel most anxious in the evenings, especially when I think about the delivery."

**Y** for You: Focus on self-care, prioritizing your well-being and seeking help when needed.

Example: "I took a 20-minute walk today, and it really helped clear my mind."

**Reflection:**

How did you feel today?

Did you notice any patterns in your emotions?

What steps can you take tomorrow to focus on self-care?



## **Worksheet 2: Hormonal Harmony (S.L.E.E.P.)**

**Purpose:** Hormonal changes during pregnancy can affect your mood. This worksheet helps you develop habits that will keep you emotionally balanced.

**Instructions:** Complete the steps of the S.L.E.E.P. mnemonic each week to maintain hormonal harmony and mental well-being.

### **S.L.E.E.P**

**S** for Sleep: Aim for 7-9 hours of rest each night to regulate your hormones.

Tip: Establish a bedtime routine—dim the lights an hour before bed and avoid screens.

**L** for Lifestyle: Practice stress-reduction techniques like mindfulness, yoga, or deep breathing.

Tip: Spend 10 minutes each day practicing deep breathing or mindfulness to help calm your mind.

**E** for Eat: Choose a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Tip: Try to include omega-3-rich foods like fish and nuts, which can help stabilize mood.

**E** for Exercise: Regular physical activity can improve mood and energy levels.

Tip: Walk for 30 minutes each day or try prenatal yoga to stay active and relaxed.

**P** for Professional Help: Seek help if mood swings become overwhelming or affect your well-being.

Tip: Reach out to your healthcare provider or a therapist if you notice persistent symptoms of depression or anxiety.

### **Reflection:**

- Which of these steps have you been able to incorporate into your daily life?
- What challenges did you face, and how can you address them in the upcoming week

## **Worksheet 3: Recognizing and Addressing Antenatal Depression and Anxiety (S.A.F.E. + Emotional Self-Assessment)**

**Purpose:** This worksheet helps you track and assess signs of antenatal anxiety and depression, allowing you to catch symptoms early and seek appropriate support. Keep in mind that while this worksheet can help identify potential signs of anxiety or depression, a more detailed screening is necessary for a formal diagnosis. This should be carried out by your healthcare provider.

### **S.A.F.E. Framework**



**S** for Support:

Reach out to someone you trust if you're feeling overwhelmed. Talking to a loved one, friend, or support group can help alleviate feelings of isolation.

*Example:* "I will talk to my partner about how I'm feeling."

## A for Assess:

Reflect on your emotional state. Are you feeling disconnected, hopeless, or anxious? Take note of any persistent feelings.

*Example:* "I've been feeling anxious about the baby's arrival and overwhelmed with tasks."

## F for Feel:

Remember that your feelings are valid. It's okay to have a range of emotions, and seeking support is important.

*Example:* "I felt sad today, but I know it's okay to seek help if this continues."

## E for Empower:

Trust yourself to take the necessary steps to improve your well-being. Schedule a check-in with your healthcare provider or a therapist if needed.

*Example:* "I'll make an appointment with my doctor to talk about how I'm feeling."

## **Emotional Self-Assessment:**

### **Identifying Symptoms:**

- Take a moment to reflect on how you've been feeling during your pregnancy. Use the space below to capture any emotional or mental changes you may

have noticed.

- Emotions I've Felt:
- Write down the emotions you've experienced today or over the past few days.

*Example:* "Excitement, but also anxiety and occasional sadness.

**Check off any symptoms you've been experiencing lately. These can be signs of antenatal anxiety or depression.**

- ☐ Persistent sadness
- ☐ Difficulty sleeping
- ☐ Loss of appetite or overeating
- ☐ Feeling overwhelmed or anxious
- ☐ Trouble concentrating
- ☐ Mood swings or irritability
- ☐ Thoughts of harming yourself
- ☐ Other concerns (please specify): -----

**Support Network:**

- Identify people you can reach out to for support, whether it's for emotional, practical, or professional help.
- Who can you talk to? (Write down names or roles of people you can reach out to when you need support.)

*Example: "My partner, my best friend, or my therapist."*

## **Action Plan:**

- Write down one action you can take today to support your emotional health.

*Example:* "I will reach out to a friend today and talk about how I'm feeling."

## **Reflection Questions:**

- How did you feel today?
- Did you notice any patterns in your emotions (such as particular times of day when you feel more anxious or sad)?
- What steps can you take tomorrow to focus on your mental health and self-care?
- Have you been able to implement any of the suggestions from the S.A.F.E. framework?

Are there any gaps in your support network that need to be addressed?

**Important Note:** If you've checked off several symptoms, or if you feel that your emotional state is not improving, it may be helpful to seek professional help for a more detailed screening. Your healthcare provider is an excellent resource for formal diagnosis and support.

## **Worksheet 4: Support System Reflection**

**Purpose:** This worksheet is designed to help you identify and involve your support system in your journey through pregnancy. It will also encourage open communication with your partner and family.

**Instructions:** Take a few minutes each week to think about your support system. This exercise can help strengthen your emotional well-being during pregnancy.

### **Support System Checklist:**

- **Partner:** How can your partner support you emotionally during this time? Example: "My partner can help me with household chores and be there for me when I feel anxious."
- **Family:** Do you have extended family or friends who can offer emotional support?

Example: "My mother-in-law is always available to talk and reassure me."

- **Healthcare Providers:** Are you keeping regular appointments with your doctor or midwife to monitor your emotional health?

Example: "I have a therapy session scheduled for next week to discuss my anxiety."

- **Community or Religious Support:** Are there any community or religious groups you can turn to for additional support?



Example: "I'm part of a pregnancy support group at my local church that I find helpful."

**Reflection:**

- Who are the most reliable sources of emotional support for you?
- How can you involve them more in your pregnancy journey?
- Are there any gaps in your support network that you'd like to address?

## **Worksheet 5: Cultural Coping Strategies**

**Purpose:** Cultural practices can offer unique ways to cope with emotional shifts during pregnancy. This worksheet helps you incorporate culturally relevant practices into your emotional health routine.

**Instructions:** Reflect on any cultural practices that may help you navigate the emotional challenges of pregnancy. Include any spiritual, familial, or community-based practices that resonate with you.

### **Cultural Practices Reflection**

- **Traditional Practices:** Are there any local customs or traditions that provide comfort during pregnancy?

Example: "In my culture, women often gather to offer prayers for a safe delivery, which helps reduce my anxiety."

- **Family Support:** How does your family support you emotionally, and how can they provide help during your pregnancy?

Example: "My aunties will often visit and give advice on how to stay calm and healthy during pregnancy."

- **Spiritual Practices:** Are there spiritual rituals that bring you peace and strength?

Example: "I find peace in daily meditation and prayer, which

calms my mind and helps me manage stress."

### **Reflection:**

- Which cultural practices help you feel supported and emotionally balanced during pregnancy?
- How can you integrate these practices into your daily routine to improve your mental well-being?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Adetutu Kunuji is a medical doctor with over 15 years of experience in physical and mental health, including seven years of clinical practice within the NHS in the United Kingdom. She is a Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK) and a passionate advocate for maternal mental health. With a clinical focus on perinatal and youth mental health, Dr. Kunuji has spent years supporting women through the emotional and psychological challenge of motherhood. As a psychiatrist, wife, and mother, she brings both professional expertise and lived experience to her work, offering women compassionate, practical, and evidence-based guidance to help them prioritise their mental well-being without guilt.

She is the founder of Mente Calma, a mental health support service, and The Mother's Circle by Mente Calma, a nurturing community where honesty, connection, and self-compassion are central to supporting expectant and new mothers. Dr. Kunuji's work is grounded in the belief that maternal mental health deserves the same care and attention as physical health, and that emotional resilience begins with acknowledging the realities of parenting without shame or pressure to be perfect.

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