

MANAGING OVERWHELM AND DISTRESS THROUGH THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

A guide for Expecting and new mums and dads

Humans like to be in control. It helps us feel that life is safe and predictable. But the world is unpredictable in an unparalleled way right now. We all get wobbly at times. Figuring out what stabilises you under stressful conditions empowers you to take action when you feel shaky or uncertain. Here are some ideas to support you manage times of overwhelm and distress during pregnancy and into life with a baby.



Look at what you can control and lean into that. Lead with what you feel certain about and make an action plan where possible. Decrease uncertainty by becoming informed about labour, birth, breastfeeding and hospital policies. Look for things in your daily life where you have decision-making power. Taking action and making decisions gives a sense of agency. Ask yourself, “What can I do? What decisions can I make in this situation?”

Note what you can't control – set that to the side and as much as possible, let it be. Of course, you may feel disappointed, anxious, angry. It feels unfair or sad that you can't have your family visit you in hospital or hold your precious baby. Acknowledge and label your feelings, recognise you can't control the situation and set it aside to refocus. Make decisions about ways you can work around the situation to meet your needs as best as possible given the limitations. To accept something doesn't mean that you need to like it or agree with it. It means simply seeing things as they are.

Tolerating uncertainty and distress is a capacity we can increase. Being open to noticing uncertainty and sitting with it, without becoming overwhelmed can build a resilience. Notice and pause. Practice deep breathing and staying as calm as possible while acknowledging and allowing your distress to settle.

Bring gratitude into your daily life by leaning into what you enjoy, what you love, what you appreciate. Orient your mind to what you are thankful for. That doesn't mean pretending all is perfect, it means choosing to focus on things that are meaningful to you and noticing the joy, love or appreciative feelings you have. Gratitude may emerge from noticing your baby move in utero or holding your baby if s/he has arrived, it may come from noticing nature, or from the physical feelings of relaxation while you shower. Gratitude can also be cultivated by actively asking yourself what you are grateful for today. This can be enhanced with a daily gratitude diary – writing down three things you are grateful for at the end of each day. Direct some energy to being grateful.

Hand-on-heart – a mindful, compassionate practice can provide soothing comfort from distress. Research shows that placing our right hand on our heart-area and slow breathing can help to create calm. More generally, we can practice self-compassion by treating ourselves with kindness and care, as we would a good friend. You can find more on self-compassion, including guided exercises, by Dr Kristin Neff: www.self-compassion.org

Hands-on-belly or around baby – remember what this time is about for you. Refocus away from the worries of the rest of the world and orient your mind to your baby and yourselves as a family unit. Hold tight to what is meaningful for you. If you are in pregnancy, think about what life might look like when baby arrives. Consider where baby will sleep, feed, bathe and be changed. Develop a safety net of support. Make a list of support services and have these on the fridge, for instance your GP, obstetrician, maternal and child health line, Australian Breastfeeding Association.

Creative use of connection and support – given the limitations brought by social distancing and isolation, we need to get creative to connect with loved ones and feel supported. Use technology to your advantage to connect. Consider ways you can be supported in the postpartum by family who are available – for instance, can they drop a meal and supplies at the front door and wave through the window. There are numerous online parents' groups for connection and support – see our website under 'Groups'. Look after each other – having a baby is known to put a strain on all relationships – if you notice your partner is looking distressed, quickly help soothe them by voice, touch, humour or helpfulness.

Self-care – the best self-care activities are the one you actually do. What works for you? Any of the above list can be acts of self-care. In addition, focused breathing, mindfulness, yoga, gentle walking all provide soothing calm. Distraction provides a refocus and a break from worrying thoughts. Intentionally engaging in self-care also gives a sense of agency – this is something you have control over. Lead with things that provide you pleasure, meaning, connectedness and soothing relief.

Limit media exposure – by all means stay updated for practical and safety reasons. Use reliable sources that are government-based or from peak professional groups, such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Australia (RANZCOG) or Australian College of Midwives. Go news-free overnight (8pm-8am) and only check once during the day or when necessary. If you become too anxious reading updates, ask your partner or someone trusted to keep up-to-date and let you know of any changes.

Need more support?

We have you covered. *Centre for Perinatal Psychology* is a network of 60+ perinatal psychologists around Australia. We love supporting expectant and new parents in their journey.

www.centreforperinatalpsychology.com.au

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