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# MOM ANXIETY

## FINDING RELIEF



POSTPARTUM SUPPORT YUKON

# DISCLAIMER

The information provided here is a summary and does not contain all possible information on anxiety, anxiety during the perinatal period, or anxiety during motherhood. This guide is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not meant to replace information from a qualified health care provider or mental health professional. Again, the information contained here should not be taken as medical advice, nor does this information qualify as a therapeutic relationship. If you are in need of immediate assistance, please dial 911 or your local emergency number, contact your local community health centre, or visit your local emergency department.



# Welcome!

Hi, I'm Shanny! I'm the founder of Postpartum Support Yukon, mom of three, maternal-infant mental health practitioner, Certified Breastfeeding Specialist, and Certified Infant Sleep Specialist.

I'm so glad you found this workbook and that you're taking steps to learn about your anxiety and find relief..

I know first hand how challenging it is to live with anxiety and how debilitating it can be. I also know that it is 100% treatable and relief is possible. That's why I created this guide. Here, you'll learn more about anxiety, why it happens, how it shows up in motherhood, common symptoms, treatment options, and some basic skills to feel better..

*Shanny*

# Anxiety:

What is it, why does it happen, & how does it show up in motherhood?



Anxiety is the body's internal alarm system. When faced with an actual or perceived threat, the emotional processing part of the brain, the amygdala, sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus. This activates the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), forcing a fight or flight response. As a result, the body becomes flooded with adrenaline, increasing heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and alertness. The release of adrenaline also triggers glucose and fats to enter the bloodstream in order to provide the body with energy in order to react.

As the adrenaline subsides, the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) should kick in and return the body to a relaxed and balanced state. However, some people remain hyperaroused, with stress hormones continuing to circulate. This may trigger a "freeze" response where the PNS seeks to protect the body and mind from this chronic stress. As such, you may experience irritability, nausea, recurring/intrusive thoughts, difficulty concentrating, digestive issues, sleep problems, and poor memory, to name a few.

Alternatively, in particularly distressing or traumatic situations, the PNS may be activated instead of the SNS. This happens when we can't fight or flee, so we freeze. In this case, we don't get the opportunity to move through the anxious process to recovery. We remain stuck. As such, we may feel paralyzed, shocked, disconnected from our body, or numb.

If we think about it, when we become parents and we're responsible for another life, we face many actual and potential threats. This, coupled with genetics, hormones, life stressors, personal experience, and societal expectations, a lot is constantly triggering the alarm system. While a certain level of anxiety is adaptive and to be expected, it becomes problematic when symptoms interfere with daily functioning.

## Facts:

- Maternal anxiety affects 1 in 5 women.
- Symptoms can persist longer than one year.
- Anxiety is common, but treatable.



# Types of Anxiety

There are various forms of anxiety and anxiety disorders. The most common forms of anxiety in motherhood are:

01

**Generalized anxiety disorder:** characterized by excessive, irrational and difficult to manage worry.

02

**Social anxiety disorder:** an intense fear of social situations. This may include feeling judged or watched, or fear of interacting with people.

03

**Panic disorder:** frequent and unexpected panic attacks characterized by a sudden wave of fear, discomfort, or a sense of losing control.

04

**Obsessive-compulsive disorder:** uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts or fears that lead to repetitive behaviours or urges.

05

**Post-traumatic stress disorder:** triggered by a traumatic or distressing event resulting in flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance of peoples, places, or things associated with the event.

\*Obsessive-compulsive and post-traumatic stress aren't considered anxiety disorders, but I'm going to include them for our purposes. I've also used the term "disorder," but you can experience signs and symptoms without necessarily having a disorder.

# RISK FACTORS

- Previous history of anxiety
- Lack of social support
- Obstetric complications
- Single parent
- Pregnancy or infant loss
- Low socio-economic status
- NICU stay or baby with health concerns
- Low partner satisfaction
- Recent stressful life events
- Teen/young parent

Anxiety does not discriminate. It can impact anyone. It's also important to note that having one or more risk factors doesn't mean that you will experience anxiety.



# Postpartum Anxiety may look like...

Signing up for a parent-baby group, but never attending out of fear of being judged.

Nervous energy that you can't turn off.

Not leaving your baby with other caregivers, because they won't take care of them like you will.

Constantly researching & wanting to do the “right” thing.

Worrying about germs or contamination, so you clean & sanitize excessively.

Violent thoughts & explosive episodes of rage.

Not bathing your baby because of intrusive images of your baby drowning.

Rigid about sleep & feeding schedules.





## SYMPTOM CHECKLIST

- shortness of breath
- irregular heartbeat
- trembling or shaking
- sweating/hot flashes or chills
- nausea or stomach pain
- health related fears
- fearful of social situations
- feelings of dread
- inability to relax
- loss of appetite
- irritable
- body aches/tension
- ruminating thoughts
- insomnia
- replaying past events
- forgetfulness
- overly cautious
- feelings of dread
- inability to relax
- avoiding people, places, or things

# Anxiety Tracker

DAY	SYMPTOMS	WHAT HAPPENED?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

## EXERCISE

# Know Your Anxiety

Reflect on your situation, are you experiencing anxiety? How does anxiety show up for you? What are your symptoms? It can be helpful to bring this exercise & the symptoms checklist to your primary care provider or counsellor.

1. How does anxiety show up for you? What are your symptoms?

2. How long have you experienced these symptoms?

3. If you've experienced anxiety in the past, what helped?

# FINDING Relief

The first line of defence for anxiety is talk therapy, specifically cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). The CBT model of anxiety argues that some event results in thoughts, behaviours, bodily responses, and emotions that influence each other and may perpetuate anxious feelings. CBT helps people to identify, question and change the thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that are causing difficulty.

In more moderate to severe cases, medication may be prescribed initially or in conjunction with therapy. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the most widely used and most researched medication for perinatal anxiety. SSRIs work by increasing the level of serotonin in the brain. However, depending on your situation a different medication may be prescribed.

Other forms of therapy, such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) may also be appropriate. EMDR seeks to integrate unprocessed traumatic memory using bilateral stimulation (BLS) through alternating eye, tactile or audio. In addition, self-help measures like NEST-S (nutrition, exercise, sleep and rest, time alone, and support) may also be beneficial.

It's important to note that treatment and relief measures are highly individualized. What works for one person may not work for another. The remainder of this guide will focus on self-soothing techniques that may assist you in finding relief. If you find any of these exercises distressing, please stop and reach out to your health care provider or mental health counsellor.

# Talking To Your Primary Care Provider

If you are experiencing anxiety, I strongly recommend speaking with your primary care provider. This is important, particularly if you don't feel like yourself, symptoms are impacting daily functioning, you're concerned about yours or your baby's safety, you're struggling to care for yourself or your baby, or your symptoms have persisted longer than two weeks.

01

Choose the care provider that you feel most comfortable with. This can be your maternity care provider, midwife, family physician, community health nurse, or go to your local emergency department.

02

Schedule a longer appointment. It may be helpful to tell reception that you have some concerns around perinatal mental health.

03

Print and fill out the symptom checklist, "know your anxiety" exercise, and anxiety tracker. Bring these with you to your appointment so your care provider can review.

04

Do some research on PMADs. There are many great websites, forums, books, and even social media accounts to learn from. Write down any questions, thoughts, concerns, etc. and bring this with you to your appointment. Feel free to skip this step if it's too distressing.

05

During your appointment, be open and honest. Your provider can't help you if they don't know how you feel. Don't be afraid to ask questions and write notes. If a follow-up appointment is needed, try to make it before you leave.

## EXERCISE

# Find Your Calm

Calming the mind helps to settle the nervous system. Use this exercise to create your calm place. Practice going to this space when you don't feel anxious. This makes it easier to use these strategies when you need them.

1. Think of a place that you find calming. A place that brings you peace and relaxation. It can be a place that you've been to before, a place you've seen in pictures, or a place you make up in your mind. It can be with a person that makes you feel safe. There's no right or wrong.
2. Immerse yourself in your calm place. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Feel? Take a couple of deep breaths.
3. Continue to envision your calm place. Take in the sights, sounds, smells...Now think of a cue word or phrase that will help remind you of this place. Say it to yourself as you continue to focus.
4. As you do this, cross your hands & hook your thumbs across your chest. Alternate tapping your hands from left to right 8-10 times. This is called the "butterfly hug" and it's a form of bilateral stimulation, which helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system responsible for rest & relaxation. If this doesn't feel good, please discontinue.



*Finding your  
calm is a  
foundational  
piece in anxiety  
treatment.*

# Grounding Exercise

When you feel overwhelmed or stuck, grounding exercises are a good way to calm your nervous system or return to the present.

1. Name FIVE things you can see.
2. Name FOUR things you can hear.
3. Name THREE things you can touch.
4. Name TWO things you can smell.
5. Name ONE things you can taste or state one affirmation. For example, "I am safe."



# SELF-SOOTHING TECHNIQUES

- Move your body in any way that feels good to you
- Hold an ice pack against your chest & then the back of your neck
- Sing, hum, or chant
- Proprioceptive input (e.g., push a wall, use a weighted blanket, lifting weights, get
- Journaling
- Take a walk
- Use a heating pad
- Heel drops
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Gentle strokes on the arms or legs.
- Meditation

Self-soothing is a coping strategy that involves engaging in calming & comforting activities. These activities activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which decreases feelings of anxiety, stress, & physical discomfort. These techniques may slow impulsive urges, increase tolerance to distress, increase one's ability to be present, & increase insight into one's experience. However, overusing these strategies can lead to avoidance & may be counterproductive.



# NESTS

Nutrition, Exercise, Sleep & Rest, Time Alone, & Support are all critical pieces in mental & physical wellness that are often neglected in early parenting.

## **NUTRITION**

Nutrition plays a key role in our overall wellness. Unfortunately, our modern day diet & lifestyle doesn't always support our wellness. Staying hydrated, eating nutrient foods, 3 meals per day, & limiting caffeine & alcohol, & taking supplements as directed can all be helpful in managing anxiety.

## **EXERCISE**

Regular exercise has been shown to improve mood & energy levels, reduce stress & anxiety, promote sleep, reduce muscle tension, help clear the mind, & increase social connections.

## **SLEEP & REST**

Sleep is a hot topic & hard to come by during the early years. However, a lack of sleep & rest can make anxiety worse. This may require having your partner taking over some nighttime parenting or daily chores, napping or resting with your baby, or going to bed early.

## **TIME ALONE**

As moms, we tend to put the needs of our family before our own. As a result, there may be little time for things that you find enjoyable. Give yourself permission to do things that make you, you!

## **SUPPORT**

It's important to examine yourself & your life to determine what areas you need help with. This could be childcare, emotional support from your partner, spending time with friends, & support groups. Support can also be grocery pick-up, a house cleaner, take-out once a week, a change in environment, or setting boundaries.

# NESTS

Write one small, attainable way you can achieve each in your daily life.

N

## NUTRITION

e.g., 3 meals a day, meal prep, hydrate, limit caffeine

E

## EXERCISE

e.g., a walk around the block

S

## SLEEP & REST

e.g., going to bed early, no screens before bed,

T

## TIME ALONE

e.g., implement a quiet time, engage in a hobby, journal

S

## SUPPORT

e.g., friends, family, child care, house cleaner

Anxiety is not  
me, it's  
something I  
feel at times.

Just like  
before, I will  
survive this  
situation.

I am safe.

I inhale calm &  
exhale  
tension.