

Perinatal Mental Health in Times of War and Disaster Supporting Pregnant and Postpartum Women

Dear mother or expecting mother,

You are pregnant, or have recently given birth, in an area affected by war or a natural disaster. Your life has been upended and your sense of safety has been shattered. This is nothing like the life you had expected or imagined for yourself, your baby and your spouse or partner. You had no way of predicting this course of events when you decided to start a family.

Even though we can only try to imagine how you must be feeling right now, we would like to support you remotely. We will do this by sharing information with you that will hopefully give you some degree of security and stability during this intense period – a time in which you also happen to be pregnant or are a new mum.

This information is designed for all women who are currently pregnant or have recently given birth and who are living under extremely stressful circumstances due to war or a natural disaster. It is intended both for women who are still living in these areas and those who have since found refuge in a reception centre. Whether you are from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, or another country: know that you are not alone, and that you are in our thoughts!

Your current feelings (or absence of feelings) are normal

During situations of unexpected and extreme stress, you go into a state known as ‘survival mode’. Your body’s instinct is to either flee or protect itself when possible. When your life is in danger, your body may suddenly ‘freeze up’, and you may feel unable to move or function like you normally do. These are all automatic physical reactions over which you have no control. When survival mode kicks in, all other feelings are shut down, as they are distracting and would only get in the way at this time. For example, you may not be able to enjoy some of the things you usually do, and you may feel less connected to others. This may also mean you are unable to enjoy your pregnancy or new-born child and may not even be able to bond with them. You may also find yourself thinking you would rather not be pregnant at all. These are all normal feelings and thoughts in an abnormal situation and they say nothing about you as a mother – you are OK. They do say something about how serious this situation is and the toll it is taking on you, your brain and your body.

It is also normal to be completely focused on yourself and your baby right now – that’s all part of having a baby. Women need to do this to prepare for motherhood. It means they can look after and protect their baby once it is born. This need can become even stronger during times of extreme stress or danger. As a result, you might not pay much attention to other people, even those you care about deeply. This, too, is normal, and does not mean you are a selfish person. It simply means you are preparing for motherhood and the arrival of your child.

What can you do for your unborn child?

Besides feeling worried about your baby's physical health, you may also be concerned about his or her mental wellbeing. We know that unborn babies experience their mother's emotions during pregnancy and may also be exposed to their mother's stress hormones. There is nothing you can do about this, and it is not your fault! While you cannot really control what is going on around you, you *can* take care of yourself and your baby by responding to the aftermath of these terrible experiences as well as you can. You can cope with the stress by adding some positive feelings to the environment of your unborn child. Try to treat yourself with love and compassion – you are experiencing something most people can't even begin to imagine. Make time for yourself to relieve everyday stress by finding someone to support you or a peaceful spot where you can relax. This will help both you and your baby. We know from research that interacting with your baby while you are pregnant will help you bond with your baby after you give birth. It will also be easier for you to soothe your baby if you have been able to regularly communicate with him or her during pregnancy. What we would like to tell you is that, while there is not much you can do about the war or the disaster you experienced, you *can* focus on communicating with your baby. This will help both of you get off to the best possible start.

How can you strengthen your bond with your baby during pregnancy?

- Talk to your baby. Make contact, place your hands on your belly and tell your baby about what is going on in your life right now. Explain to your baby that you are nervous and anxious, but that this has nothing to do with him or her.
- Tell your baby that they are welcome, that you love them, and that you will do everything you can to protect them. Your baby is safe in your womb.
- Your baby can hear you from around the twenty-second week of pregnancy and will start to recognise your voice. Talk to your baby and sing songs to him or her. You can also play music for your child and then replay it for them after you have given birth. They will recognise this music and will find it soothing.
- If you move your hands across your belly, you will notice that your baby will start moving too, maybe even move towards you.
- Try to get you and your baby into a peaceful state of mind. Images are very powerful, so close your eyes and think of a memory that makes you feel calm and happy. If these images evoke unpleasant memories for you as well, use your imagination to create a fantasy scene in your mind. For example, you can visualize that you are lying on the world's most beautiful beach. Try to imagine the heat of the sun on your skin and the sounds and scents of the sea. Do this exercise a few times a day. Even though you are experiencing lots of stress, if you get yourself into this peaceful state regularly, you will also help your baby to relax, feel safe, and let go of everyday stresses.

- You can give your baby an affectionate nickname. This may make it easier for you to picture them as a real little person with their own needs and feelings.
- If you are a person of faith, you can picture a religious figure like God, Buddha, Allah, a spiritual leader, or whoever else might be important to you. Try to imagine that this figure or person is protecting you, holding you or is speaking words of encouragement to you.

How can you strengthen your bond with your baby after giving birth?

- Hold your baby close to you. It is important for your baby to feel your skin, smell your scent, and hear your voice and heartbeat.
- Talk to your baby and explain to them what is going on and why mummy is tense or anxious. Make it clear that this has nothing to do with them.
- Sing songs for your baby or play soft music and rock your baby to the rhythm.
- Carry your baby around with you in a baby carrier (that is, close to your body). Newborns like the movement of walking, as this is similar to what they experienced in the womb, where they were also constantly rocked back and forth.
- Breastfeeding is healthy for your baby, even in highly stressful situations. It involves lots of skin-on-skin contact, which is both good for your baby's development and has all kinds of health benefits for him or her. Also, breast milk is always available and safe. As a new mum, it can also be comforting to feel that you can at least do something during this time of powerlessness. Breastfeeding can also be a very good and effective way to comfort and soothe your baby.
- Most new mothers find that breastfeeding makes them tired. This is because milk production saps a lot of your body's energy. Breastfeeding can take its toll on the body and may sometimes even be painful. For example, if you are suffering from breast inflammation or if your baby does not latch on properly. In stressful and dangerous situations, you may experience difficulty producing breast milk or breastfeeding your child. If this is the case, be gentle with yourself. Your baby will also grow if you give them formula, and they will be nurtured by the care and attention you give them during feedings.

What can you do to help yourself?

- People tend to feel best when they have a sense of control over themselves and the world around them. Structure and predictability (developing daily routines) can contribute to that sense of control. Everything around you has changed now. You may even spend the next few days hiding inside a bomb shelter. Or you may find yourself in a large reception centre for refugees surrounded by people you don't know. See if you can find a way to build routines into your day. For example, you could take naps at the same time every day, go for short

- walks every two hours, chat with someone over a cup of tea, and eat your meals at regular times, if possible. Think of some daily rituals to help you power through your day.
- Be kind to yourself. You find yourself in extreme circumstances. Tell yourself you are doing well: that all your thoughts and feelings are OK and that you are a good mother. It is good to repeat this to yourself as often as possible.
- Physical contact with another person boosts levels of oxytocin (nicknamed the 'love hormone' or 'cuddle hormone'). If there is no one else around to hug, you can wrap your arms around yourself, caress yourself, and slowly rock yourself back and forth. This will also boost oxytocin production. Oxytocin is the hormone that plays an important role in the development of attachment between mothers and their babies.
- If you can, try to keep a journal in which you write down your experiences. If you find this too emotionally overwhelming, you could spend 20 minutes every day writing down whatever comes to your mind. Once you have done that, put your journal away and go do something completely different: something that requires your attention, for example playing a game on your phone or having a chat with someone.
- One thing you do have control over is your breathing. Your breathing is connected to your body's stress response system. Think of your breathing as something that is there to support you, like a railing to hold on to. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take a few deep breaths for a few seconds, and then exhale for a few seconds. Repeat this for several minutes. Focus on how you feel as you inhale the air, or as it flows into your stomach or chest, and how your breath leaves your body through your mouth, releasing all the tension built up inside your body. Say the word 'relax' each time you exhale.
- If you feel anxiety and stress because you find yourself thinking about everything that has happened recently, you can try comforting and distracting yourself a little. Try the Butterfly Hug: Wrap your arms around yourself, so that each hand touches the opposite upper arm or shoulder. Next, move your hands like the wings of a butterfly, tapping your arms and shoulders in an alternating rhythm. As you do this exercise, tell yourself: *'I am safe now; the events we've recently experienced are over.'* Of course, the actual war or the damage caused by the natural disaster are still a reality, but this is about reassuring yourself at this moment by telling yourself repeatedly: *'I am safe now; the events we've recently experienced are over.'* Stop after around 20 seconds and take a deep breath. Continue to tap your shoulders while repeating this soothing sentence and continue until you feel calm enough.
- Reassure yourself if you are afraid that your baby is not getting the nourishment he or she needs. Everything you eat and drink – the nutrients your body stores – go to your baby first and then to you.

Social support

- If your spouse or partner is with you or if you are able to phone and send messages, pick a time of the day for the two of you to communicate. Tell your spouse / partner how you are feeling and ask them how they are feeling. By sharing your feelings with each other, you can support one another.
- If you do not have a partner or if the two of you cannot be together right now, try to find someone who can be a confidant to you over the next while. Is there someone you trust and with whom you feel safe? Ask that person to read this leaflet, so they can help you express and manage your thoughts and feelings. This person could help you make a list of items you will need during and after childbirth, and if it's possible and you like the idea, they can be with you when you have your baby.
- Try to connect with another pregnant woman or new mum, so the two of you can share your experiences and support each other. This person may be able to continue supporting you once your baby is born, and help you with breastfeeding or look after your baby when you need to rest.
- There are plenty of people who are happy to help out, so don't feel embarrassed to ask them. Most people will understand that you and your baby need support now more than ever.

Preparing for childbirth

If you have any questions or would like to contact an obstetrician, In Partu will put you in touch with a Dutch birth attendant. You can register free of charge on www.inpartu.nl. In Partu can help you remotely (online or by telephone) to deliver your baby if no obstetricians or doctors are available.

Mental-health support

If you find that you require support from a psychologist because you are experiencing feelings of distress, have difficulty sleeping, or are haunted by images of what you have experienced, you can register with Wereldpsychologen [Home | Mysite 2 \(wereldpsychologen.nl\)](http://Home | Mysite 2 (wereldpsychologen.nl)). Wereldpsychologen is an organisation that employs Dutch mental-health professionals who are there to support people on a voluntary basis, including by telephone or over video. Wereldpsychologen will refer you to a psychologist, who will then get in contact with you.

Dear mother or expecting mother, we hope that this information will offer you some level of support. We wish you, your baby and your spouse / partner, the best possible start as a new family. Remember that the bond between you and your baby is unique, no matter what might happen in your lives and the world around you.