



Emotional health during pregnancy and early parenthood



beyondblue
the national depression initiative

**An information booklet
for parents of
multiple birth children**

Foreword and Acknowledgments

This booklet has been prepared by Janette Brooks in collaboration with the Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA) to enhance the emotional health and well-being of Australian families raising twins and higher order multiples in April 2009.

The content of this booklet has been based upon material contained in the information booklet “Emotional Health During Pregnancy & Early Parenthood”. Both of these booklets have been produced by *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* and are available nationally by calling the *beyondblue* info line 1300 22 4636 or from the *beyondblue* website **www.beyondblue.org.au**

This booklet has also drawn upon material included in the “Childbirth Stress & Depression Information Book” written by Pope and Watts and funded and distributed by the Department of Health, Western Australia in 1996, and “Postnatal Depression – the Inside Story” written by Milgrom, Richards & Ericksen, Parent Infant Research Institute, Victoria (1998).

Quotes from parents of twins are taken from participants of *Having Twins: How does the Family cope?*, a study funded by VicHealth and conducted by Prof David Hay and the AMBA (Victoria) in 1990. Quotes from parents of higher order multiples are taken from personal communication, with thanks to AMBA.

The focus of this booklet is the emotional well-being of parents of multiple birth children. Practical parenting issues such as breastfeeding, maternal and infant health risks are beyond the scope of this booklet.

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Pregnancy, birth and early parenthood for most people is a very positive experience. However, it may not be totally what you expected. This is a time of transition for you and it can be difficult to adjust. Not many people talk about the inside story...

Before birth – Antenatal

The diagnosis – multiples!

“I would have been disappointed if it had not been twins, as twins had been suggested. I was very happy when twins were found.”

Mother of twins

“I cried, I did not want twins. Not ready for two babies. Unplanned pregnancy, let alone twins. Not sure if I will be able to cope as a mother of twins. The financial worries are overwhelming, the change of lifestyle frightening.”

Expectant mother of twins

“Oh my god! It was a good job I was laying down when I was told. I went to find out if I was having twins, didn't expect triplets at all. When you've already got 3, going to 6 all of a sudden is a lot to take in.”

Mother of triplets

Congratulations! If you are reading this booklet you or a loved one have either received the news that you are pregnant with more than one baby or have recently given birth to ‘multiples’ (i.e. twins, triplets or more). As a result you will more than likely be experiencing a tidal wave of emotions. Common emotions reported by expectant parents when they find out they are having more than one baby include joy, shock, panic, exhilaration, fascination, bewilderment, anxiety, confusion and excitement. A sense of pride in being ‘exceptional’ is also often reported by parents of multiple birth children.

Parents expecting more than one baby may worry about the extra financial, childcare, and health problems they might have. For parents who already have children, concern over how to prepare them for the arrival of more than one new baby may be worrying. Parents can also be concerned about how they will provide enough attention and care for older siblings as well as the new babies.

Caring for more than one baby is a new skill that will take time to develop and adjustments will need to be made by everyone in your family. But with preparation and support, families with more than one baby can be managed, enjoyed and are hugely rewarding for everyone.

“I think all five of us have meshed very well together, a good team. My relationships are better, especially with (my wife) and (older child).”

Father of three

The emotional journey

“My husband and I are so scared. We wanted a child but didn't expect three! We don't know how we are going to manage. We already have a 4 year old.”

Expectant mother of triplets

It is important to know that the feelings you are experiencing are perfectly normal, both the good and not-so-good feelings. Even if you knew there was an increased chance of having more than one baby, due to Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) or a family history, you can not avoid the emotions – they are a natural reaction to life-changing news like this.

So how do you deal with the emotions that you are feeling at the moment? Sharing how you are feeling will be a good place to start – talk to your partner (or another trusted person if your partner is unavailable) about your feelings. You may find out you are both experiencing similar emotions.

It may be comforting to know that there have been many parents who have gone before you and not only managed the unique challenges of ‘multiple parenthood’ but enjoyed the unique and very special experience of raising multiples.

“They make all the work worthwhile when they smile and cuddle you. You feel like your heart could burst.”

Mother of twins

There are also many researchers and health professionals who have spent years developing ways to help support families through pregnancy and parenthood. The information, strategies and resources in this booklet draw upon this work.



Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART)

“We’re very excited. I danced around a lot. Many feelings of ‘oh my god’. It’s hard to come to terms with, as just being pregnant was unbelievable, so having twins is an added bonus.”

Expectant mother of twins (ART)

“After everything we have been through trying to get pregnant I don’t think I could bear it if I miscarried.”

Expectant mother of twins (ART)

The chances of multiple pregnancies are greatly increased by Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) and the reaction of parents to the news of more than one baby can be quite varied (as seen from the quotes above). Parents pregnant through ART may feel they have already been on quite an emotional journey. ART can be a stressful and emotionally draining experience. The news of a multiple pregnancy when you are already emotional may be more difficult to deal with than for those who have conceived without assistance. This is especially so if there are medical complications or risks involved with your pregnancy.

Whatever your initial reaction, the transition from infertility to being a parent of multiple birth children takes time and may affect your emotions in both positive and negative ways. Support from friends, family and professionals can help to make any difficult parts of the journey more manageable for both of you.

Emotional changes during pregnancy

“Everyone tells me how huge I am but I really don’t mind, it makes me feel proud. The special attention twins get gives you more satisfaction that your children are special.”

Expectant mother of twins

“I’m looking forward to my ultrasound so I can see for myself that both babies are alive and well.”

Expectant mother of twins

As well as the obvious physical changes, psychological changes occur during pregnancy too, like joy, excitement, and crying, feeling sad or nervous. Some parents worry about the possibility of losing the babies, or going into hospital for medical procedures. For parents pregnant with more than one baby these concerns are even more understandable due to the possibility of more complications. Occasional doubts and negative thoughts or dreams are part of the normal adjustment to becoming a parent. Discussing any doubts or fears with others can be really helpful.

Dealing with difficult emotions

The emotional problems that can occur during pregnancy for parents are often misunderstood in our community and hidden because of embarrassment and shame. A couple expecting more than one baby may experience difficulty adjusting to the news and, as a result, experience low moods or anxiety.

Women are sometimes admitted to hospital during a multiple pregnancy to ensure constant bed-rest and monitor the babies' health. Women can find a long stay in hospital quite difficult, both emotionally and for practical reasons such as childcare and work.

Even though you may feel that your emotions are out of control at times during your pregnancy, the good news is that the health professionals caring for you during your pregnancy, can help you. Talk with them about how you are feeling. It's a good idea to obtain useful information now about strategies for caring for more than one baby as it might help to know how others have managed.

Emotional problems in pregnancy can be felt by the whole family, including your partner and other children. If these problems are not treated properly, they can lead to difficulties in relationships and have long-term effects. To help deal with any concerns you, your partner or children are having discuss them with your General Practitioner (GP), Obstetrician, Midwife, Child Health Nurse or another chosen healthcare professional.



Depression during pregnancy

Women pregnant with multiple babies often report a greater empathy and support given to them due to the 'special' or unique quality of their pregnancy. Nevertheless, women pregnant with more than one baby may feel upset because they're uncertain about the pregnancy or unsure about coping with more than one newborn.

Women pregnant with multiple babies are at greater risk of medical complications, such as diabetes or pre-eclampsia. The physical demands of multiple pregnancies can be physically and emotionally exhausting for women, and they may be required to stay in bed or rest for extended periods during the pregnancy. These things can add up and really get some women down.

It has been estimated that between 4 per cent and 15 per cent of pregnant women will experience depression during pregnancy. There are certain factors that can increase the risk of developing depression during pregnancy including an unplanned pregnancy, a family or personal history of emotional/psychological problems, financial pressures, lack of support, and past and present obstetric complications, including infertility.

But there are also factors that may protect a woman pregnant with multiple babies against depression during the pregnancy, including the 'special' status of a multiple pregnancy, greater social support and modified expectations about health.

The exact causes of depression before (and after) childbirth are complex. Different risk factors play a role for each woman but it's the combination of life stresses that lead to depression, together with physical, hormonal and social factors.

It is important to realise that depression is a treatable condition, from which you can recover given the appropriate treatment (e.g. counselling and/or medication), support from family and friends, and time.

Further information about depression, including symptoms and how to get help are provided in the postnatal section of this booklet (pages 13 to 27).

Anxiety during pregnancy

Essentially, anxiety is the body's way of preparing us to protect ourselves from danger, so the combination of psychological and physical changes that occur when we are anxious (e.g. being 'on edge' or alert and a rapid heart beat) are often called the 'fight or flight' response. Once the threat or danger has passed the combination of physical and psychological responses should also go away. In threatening situations the 'fight or flight' response is reasonable and even helpful.

With a multiple pregnancy having higher medical risks than a single pregnancy there may be times when it is only natural that parents-to-be may be more anxious. Often parents are reassured that it will be better once the babies are born, and this is true for the majority of parents. But if anxiety levels stay high for a long period of time or come on suddenly and you feel out of control, anxiety stops being helpful and can become a serious problem.

Anxiety and depression often occur together and just like depression, anxiety is a treatable condition, from which you can recover given the appropriate treatment (e.g. counselling and/or medication), support from family and friends, and time.

Further information about anxiety, including symptoms and how to get help are provided in the postnatal section of this booklet (pages 13 to 27).



Ways to support yourself when pregnant

Each pregnancy is different and the way you feel during your pregnancy will also be unique. It is important to look after your emotional well-being during pregnancy.

- **Make contact.** There is no reason for you to feel that you are alone. Many parents say that the best thing they did was to speak to other parents of multiple babies. This can be helpful for parents worried about how to prepare older siblings. The Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA) provides many opportunities for contact with other multiple birth families including an 'Expectant Parents Meeting' and online forums.
- **Organise a 'support team'.** Plan to have additional support for the first few months after your babies arrive. Try to organise the support over time so it's not all at once. Arrange for your partner or family member to be at home with you, and discuss the ways in which they can be of most help.
- **Identify causes of stress in your life,** such as relationship problems or financial difficulties and explore ways of dealing with these problems before the babies arrive.
- **Share** your feelings and any concerns with someone you trust. Keeping a journal can also be quite helpful.
- **Your partner's libido may change during the pregnancy.** This does not necessarily mean they are no longer attracted to you and is usually because they are worried for you and the babies. Discuss how sex and your body are changing with your partner and ask your doctor about any concerns you have.
- **Learn relaxation techniques** and use these regularly during the pregnancy. They will also come in handy after the babies arrive, especially those that don't require much time (e.g. breathing exercises) or can be done with the babies and get you out of the house (e.g. walking).
- **Don't be afraid to ask questions** of health professionals. If you don't receive enough or clear information, ask more questions or speak to another professional.
- **Be aware** of any changes from how you normally feel or behave. If you notice any major changes or they are lasting longer than usual, go and see your GP or Obstetrician. This is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. The earlier you seek help, the sooner the problems will resolve.

Issues for partners

“My concern for (my wife) is making sure she is happy and not so run down. I’m scared to say things or do things in fear of causing upset or stress to her.”

Expectant father of twins

As well as the normal concerns of expectant partners, a multiple pregnancy can add worries about possible medical complications and money problems. Expectant partners may find it comforting and useful to talk with other expectant partners, as well as people who have lived through multiple pregnancy and who are now parents.

For most couples a lot of sorting out and negotiating needs to be done before the birth, especially about who does what around the house and how much time you will both spend with the babies. These talks will also need to happen after the babies arrive, when you both have a better idea of what is required. It’s important not to have these talks when you are angry or upset.

Research has shown that men can have difficulty adjusting to a pregnant partner and may in fact find this the most difficult time of adjustment (rather than after the birth). Partners can feel left out when all the attention is being focused on the mother-to-be and the babies. Talk to your partner about how you feel and you may be able to work something out so that you are more involved.

The greatest cause of unhappiness and conflict for men is often a lack of physical intimacy with their partner, during the pregnancy and continuing after the birth. Communication is really important during this time of adjustment and issues (including sex) need to be discussed openly. Issues not discussed at the time can get worse.

Ways you can help yourself and your partner during the pregnancy

- **Share your feelings and any concerns you have with others.** Talking to friends, family, professionals or people who have experienced similar situations can be really useful and make you feel better.
- **Communicate** with your partner. You are both experiencing a huge amount of change adjusting to a pregnancy with multiples. Try to talk calmly and openly about your feelings and ways to support each other.



- **Modify the expectations you have.** Your partner will not be able to do the things around the house she usually does. Be patient and supportive and do what you can to help out.
- **Many women have decreased sexual desire** when pregnant and it may be a while before their interest resumes. This is not a sign that she is less interested in or attracted to you. The physical demands of pregnancy can decrease interest in sex as well as making it physically difficult or uncomfortable. Show affection without pressure for sex – intimacy can still be maintained without sexual intercourse.
- **Plan for the changes.** Discuss with your partner the difference you think the babies will make to your lives and the changes you'll both need to make and ways to solve potential difficulties (e.g. negotiate ways to share household chores).
- **Think of simple things you can do for your partner** that she would enjoy. Show her that you appreciate how physically uncomfortable things may be getting for her.
- **Get professional help** and also encourage your partner to get professional help if you notice that either of you are feeling really low or anxious for more than a couple of days in a row. Significant depression and anxiety do not usually resolve themselves. Depression and anxiety require early and appropriate treatment.

Pregnancy loss

Although it isn't common, one or more babies in a multiple pregnancy may die. Having more than one baby complicates the grieving process, particularly if one or more babies survive. Parents must deal with conflicting emotions – whilst grieving for the baby/ies who died and experiencing relief and joy over the arrival of the new baby/ies they are expected to care for a newborn/s. Parents may also grieve for the loss of the 'completeness' of the set of babies, with a constant reminder of what could have been.

It doesn't matter at what stage of pregnancy it occurs or why, the loss of a baby is traumatic for everyone, including parents, family, friends and hospital staff. Fears of losing the other baby/ies are natural and understandable.

There can be serious effects on parents' emotional well-being following the loss of a baby, although these are often not well-recognised by parents or health professionals. Symptoms that are actually signs of depression are sometimes considered to be part of the grieving process. Health professionals should be kept informed of how long the grief continues and how depressed the grieving person is. It's important to keep in contact with health professionals so further treatment and support can be offered if required.

Due to the many issues involved in the loss of multiple birth babies, specialist support should be sought to help you through this extremely difficult time. Many hospitals have specially trained staff and counselling or psychological support available. The Australian Multiple Birth Association has Bereavement contacts at national, state and, in some cases, local levels.

The birth

“It is disappointing to have to go through a normal delivery suite and the loss of feeling in control of the birth. Having to follow doctors ‘orders’ or advice, although I realise the risks and necessity of this.”

Mother of twins

The much-anticipated event of delivery can be a time of mixed emotions, ranging from pure joy to fear and disappointment. The delivery of more than one baby is usually more complex than the delivery of a single baby. An induced labour and epidural (medication for pain relief) may be advised. A caesarean section may be required for one or all of the babies.

Because of the possible complexity, the choices available to many parents such as a home delivery may not be options for you, which can be disappointing. Speak to your obstetrician, doctor or midwife about any fears or concerns you may have as it can be helpful to know the reasons behind the decisions being made.

The delivery room is usually quite crowded and a hub of activity with more staff and technical equipment required for a multiple birth. All the medical staff and equipment can be overwhelming for parents. Babies may be whisked away to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) or Special Care Nursery before you have a chance to hold them. This can be upsetting for parents but being prepared for the possibility of this happening and understanding why can help.



Hospitalisation – Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and Special Care Nursery

“Initially I couldn’t take it all in until I had read some books on prems (premature babies) to get used to the terminology used freely in the NICU. Crash course in medical terminology was needed...I think I was in shock.”

Mother of twins, born 3 months premature

“With the babies in hospital I was very depressed and worried about them all the time.”

Mother of twins

Multiple birth babies are often born prematurely and this means that they may require special care in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) or Special Care Nursery for days, weeks or even longer. Regardless, this is often not what parents had imagined for the beginning of their relationship with their babies. It can be an upsetting time and emotionally very tiring. Without being able to care for and hold one or more of their babies, parents may feel empty and lost.

Neonatal intensive care may be frightening and confusing with changes in your role as a parent during the sometimes extended hospital stay of your babies. Talk to the professionals caring for your babies and work with them to establish a plan for how you can be involved with their care. Don't be afraid to ask questions and request further help if necessary. It can be very helpful and comforting to make contact with other parents who have experienced similar situations. (See 'Resources' section of this booklet on pages 28 to 32).

After birth – Postnatal

Adjustment to parenthood – the joys and challenges of multiple parenthood

“The first few months are VERY hard, then it gets a lot easier and more fun. They are a joy.”

Mother of triplets

“Even when I feel so tired I could cry, one big smile from one of the kids is enough to get me through. A smile from one of them brightens the dullest day. I never regret having twins and love them dearly even though it's hard at times.”

Mother of twins

For many women, having a baby is the most significant physical, social and emotional upheaval they have ever experienced. Parenting more than one infant is a constant and demanding job and so most parents' experiences are not like the media images of two happy parents with one clean, cuddly, well-fed sleeping baby.

Dealing with changes in your lifestyle and everyday routines with your babies' individual health, behaviour patterns and personalities all requires enormous physical stamina and emotional commitment. It's not surprising that parents of more than one baby can find it hard to cope at times.

This time of change and adjustment can be more challenging than expected if one or more of your babies are born with 'special needs'. Parents can feel alone and overwhelmed and it is important to have support available for you and the babies. It can be very helpful and comforting to make contact with other parents who have experience with similar circumstances. The Australian Multiple Birth Association has 'special needs support contacts' at national, state and, in some cases, local levels.



Becoming a mother of multiple birth children

“I felt so changed by pregnancy, birth and lifestyle that I felt I didn’t know myself anymore. Life has changed so much.”

Mother of twins

“A rude awakening to have two babies so dependent on you. Things in turmoil at the beginning but settling down now and I am feeling confident in my ability to handle two at once.”

Mother of twins:

The birth of a baby is an emotional time for a family and the birth of more than one baby can increase the range of emotions experienced by parents (positive and negative). These emotions can range from joy, delight, excitement, incredible tenderness and love, to feeling frightened, overwhelmed, anxious, alone, angry, guilty and out of control.

Most women want to be a good mother and anything less than perfection can seem like an enormous disappointment. Some people’s expectations of motherhood are unrealistic.

Some unhelpful beliefs include:

- Motherhood is always happy and will fulfil all your desires
- Having babies will improve your marriage
- All multiple birth mothers should feel lucky or grateful for an ‘instant family’
- You failed as a mother if you did not deliver the ‘right’ way
- Mothers immediately recognise their babies and can tell them apart
- Mothers will always love their babies the same amount
- Mothers instinctively know how to breastfeed, comfort and settle their baby and can do this for more than one baby at a time
- Mothers should be constantly available, always put the babies’ needs first and never need time off
- Mothers cause difficult behaviour in their babies
- Only bad mothers have babies who scream in supermarkets
- Mothers have plenty of free time for cooking and cleaning
- Mothers who have difficulties should “pull up their socks and get on with it”
- Good mothers don’t have negative feelings for their children
- Every other mother is coping well.

If motherhood is not what we expected, we usually blame ourselves, rather than realise it's an enormous job with few resources available. It can be difficult to admit that you're not managing well, in case people think you're a bad mother or not trying hard enough.

A mistake easily made by mothers is to think that the low mood, tiredness or anxiety they are feeling is to be expected when caring for multiple babies. To some degree this may in fact be the case but it may also be more serious than what a good night's sleep or a day off can solve. Professional help may be required and the sooner the better (see 'Services' on page 32).

“Sometimes I don't get enough help from my husband. Sometimes I feel like I'm trying to do everything by myself.”

Mother of twins

Some partners are naturally a lot more 'hands on' than others. It's important to have realistic expectations of your partner, especially if he/she has to work outside the home as well as help care for the babies. Negotiation, communication, understanding and support are the keys to success for couples. For mothers without a partner, or a partner that works away from home (e.g. on a mine site), a good support network is really important. There will be times when a friendly ear, comforting hand or extra pair of hands is needed and knowing family, friends or professional support people are close by or a phone call away can be reassuring.

Becoming a father of multiple birth children

“I always have a part to play since my wife can not care for both simultaneously.”

Father of twins

“The past 6 months have been rather tiring but very rewarding.”

Father of twins

Men experience the process of pregnancy quite differently from women and may not begin to adapt to parenthood until after the babies are born. Like mothers, fathers can have unrealistic expectations such as:

- My relationship with my partner will automatically improve by becoming a family
- Having multiples won't change my life that much
- I'll have the same time available for work or leisure activities with my partner
- My sexual relationship with my partner will remain unchanged
- My partner will handle the messy parts of parenting



- Fathers can't do housework
- All fathers must be good providers and protectors
- I'm equipped to cope with the emotional demands of multiple parenthood.

For some men, such expectations can cause rifts in their relationship with their partner. They may perceive their partner to be pre-occupied with the needs of the babies, or they may feel left out or unloved. Health professionals can also unknowingly leave some fathers feeling overlooked. If you feel like this, speak to the person, as they probably don't realise and can make changes to involve you more.

Fathers may feel uncertain about how to be involved in the care of their babies, or what help their partner needs. If in doubt, ask your partner or just give it a go – chances are you are both learning (practice makes perfect). The good news about having more than one baby to care for is that there is plenty of bath time fun, hugs and dirty nappies to go around. A father of multiple birth children is undoubtedly a very important father.

Television portrayals of fatherhood or men's experiences with their own fathers can leave a new dad of multiple babies with little insight to what fatherhood is going to be like. Making contact with other fathers, especially fathers of multiple babies can help relieve concerns and support you through this time of change.

Older siblings

“The older kids have had to realise that their needs won't be met 1st, they now come 4th, 5th or 6th as the babies make more noise. But they have adjusted really well.”

Mother of six (triplets + 3)

“They always smile at him – relief! relief! One day they might all be friends.”

Mother of three (twins + 1)

The arrival of the new babies can be especially worrying and tiring for parents who have older children as well as the new babies to care for. Parents may feel guilty about not having as much time to spend with older siblings as they once did.

Whenever possible arrange for your partner, family members, friends, respite or baby-sitters to look after the babies so that you can have 'special time' with your older children. Involving older children in the care of the babies and making them your 'special helper/s' can also be beneficial.

Remember that you are only human and only have one pair of hands – try not to be too hard on yourself.

The 'support team'

“I feel as if everything is getting on top of me and it is worse because I have no help at all.”

Mother of twins

Having people available to support you when you arrive home with the babies can make adjusting to your new life easier. Your 'support team' may be made up of family, friends or paid professionals. Being able to catch up on sleep, spend extra time with older children or getting help with household chores can be a real blessing.

Unfortunately, family members or friends are not always available to offer support, or may actually be a source of stress for new parents. New multiple birth families may find themselves overwhelmed by well-meaning people wanting to visit and help. With two or more new babies in the house, even 'helpers' may be quite stressful for parents trying to adjust to their new roles. So be clear about your boundaries and let people know specifically how they can be of most help.

Parents often find that all the help is offered at the beginning. This can mean that the 'support team' are burnt out or due back at work all at the same time. This leaves parents (usually mum) suddenly home alone with the babies. If you have had constant support from the time the babies were born this can come as quite a shock. If possible, 'taper out' or organise your support team over a period of weeks or months. This way you do not get overwhelmed with help after you arrive home with the babies and then have no-one available later.

Depression after having babies – postnatal depression

Depression disrupts women's lives at a crucial time and can have effects on the babies, older children and the couple's relationship. Even though levels of depression for fathers appear to be highest during the pregnancy, they too are at risk of depression after the birth. Depression is usually referred to as 'postnatal depression' if it begins within 12 months of childbirth.

Signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Always exhausted* or hyperactive
- Not being able to sleep even when you have the chance
- Crying uncontrollably or feeling teary
- Finding that your moods change dramatically*



- Feeling very irritable or sensitive to noise or touch*
- Constantly thinking in a negative way*
- Unrealistic feelings that you are inadequate and/or feeling worthless
- Not being able to concentrate*
- Becoming more forgetful and confused*
- Self blame or guilt
- Loss of pleasure from things that you used to enjoy
- Feeling scared, alone, but also not wanting to be with other people
- Feelings of ambivalence towards the infants
- Feeling unable to cope*
- Preoccupied with obsessive or morbid thoughts
- Thoughts of self-harm and low self-esteem
- Inability to enjoy yourself.

Some of these feelings are in fact quite normal after child birth but if they begin to interfere with your enjoyment of your babies or daily tasks then seek help. Persistent low mood, together with some of these feelings for a period of at least 2 weeks, may indicate clinical depression. This may require further assessment and treatment by a suitably qualified health professional (e.g. clinical psychologist, psychiatrist or GP).

Caution must be taken with the symptoms indicated with an asterisk* in the list above as symptoms of sleep deprivation and depression can be very similar.

Sleep deprivation

“My wife has been very tired and this has affected the emotional state of our relationship.”

Father of twins

“My husband feels like he will have a nervous breakdown due to lack of sleep.”

Mother of twins

Not enough sleep or ‘sleep deprivation’ is always experienced by parents, but especially by parents of multiple birth children. With feeding, sleeping and changing possibly happening at different times for each baby it’s not uncommon for parents of more than one baby to feel very tired for the first few months.

It's amazing what a difference sleep can make to the way we function, both emotionally and physically. The brain relies on sleep to work effectively. The symptoms of sleep deprivation include exhaustion, tiredness and lack of physical energy. These symptoms in turn affect our emotions causing sadness, stress, anger and a more negative way of looking at things.

When you are not getting enough sleep, priorities need to be reassessed. Try to sleep whenever the babies are asleep and leave the household chores and other tasks until your energy levels are better. For some parents it is hard to swallow their pride and ask for help, but you will be far more effective in the long run if you ask for help now and get the sleep you need.

Sleep deprivation is common among new parents of multiples and may be a reason why parents do not seek help for what is actually a depressive disorder. If you are in any doubt about the cause of your 'low mood' speak to a health professional as soon as possible.

Causes of depression

“I feel very isolated at the moment, as if the world is passing me by. I don't get out very often which I think is causing me to be very depressed.”

Mother of twins

Depression can occur at any time in your life. It can be related to a major event, such as childbirth and becoming a parent.

There is limited but consistent research to show that mothers of multiples have a higher risk of developing depression after birth than mothers of single babies. A lack of social support, including support from a partner, obstetric/delivery complications (such as caesarean and premature delivery), amount of disruption at home, sleep deprivation, and social isolation have all been suggested as reasons for the increased risk of depression for mothers of multiple birth children.

There is also a number of other important risk factors that can make women more vulnerable to depression, including:

- Family history of depression
- Previous depressive episode
- Negative feelings toward or limited bonding with babies
- Problems with babies' health



- Not the expected baby (appearance, gender)
- Separation of mother and babies after birth
- ‘Difficult babies’ (temperament, sleeping habits, feeding)
- Financial concerns
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Past history of abuse or assault.

It’s important to acknowledge to yourself when something is wrong and realise that it’s OK to seek help and tell people you are feeling depressed, angry or confused. Being a parent of multiples does not mean that you have to feel exhausted and sad all the time. It can be difficult to tell the difference between sheer exhaustion and signs of depression. This means many parents of multiples with depression may be undiagnosed and untreated, thinking this must be what it is like for all parents of multiples. If you are in any doubt talk to someone about it.

Depression is not always something you can get over by yourself and the most difficult part can be to reach out and ask for help. It’s important to realise that depression is a treatable condition, one from which you can recover given the appropriate treatment (e.g. counselling), support from family and friends and time.

Anxiety after having babies

“I won’t go inside again until they have stopped crying. Then if they have fallen asleep I will stand in the kitchen helpless, guilty and unable to do anything. I am on my own today and a form of panic renders me unable to read the twins competently.”

Mother of twins

“I feel much more able to cope on my own and much more confident. But I still have bouts of panic, less and less though.”

Mother of twins (five months after birth)

It takes time to adjust to being a new parent of multiple birth children. The first few weeks after the birth involve huge changes for your family and there are lots of things that you may worry about. The babies have to adjust to a completely different environment, while mum must recover from the birth and both parents need to adjust to the reality and responsibility of caring for more than one newborn.

A reasonable level of anxiety is considered normal for all parents, and particularly parents of multiples because of the physical complications often involved in giving birth, the huge changes in your lives, and the practicality of providing total care for more than one baby. But severe or prolonged anxiety can interfere with your ability to cope with daily activities and can affect your relationships with family and friends.

Parents may experience more anxiety if one or more infants have special needs, are in need of medical intervention and/or being cared for in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

Signs and symptoms of anxiety include:

- Finding it hard to stop worrying
- Feeling edgy/restless
- Having trouble concentrating
- Muscle tension (sore back, neck, or jaw)
- Difficulties sleeping
- Fear of particular objects or situations
- Ongoing unwanted/intrusive thoughts or fears
- Irritability
- Being very alert and easily startled
- Feeling like something bad is going to happen
- Feeling light-headed or nauseous
- Trembling or shaking
- Rapid heartbeat
- Breathing difficulties (e.g. short of breath).

Anxiety disorders

It is estimated that one in four people will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives, and women are particularly at risk during pregnancy and the months following childbirth. Anxiety disorders are made up of various combinations of physical and psychological symptoms such as those listed here, and depending on the disorder can come on suddenly for a short intense period, or remain for extended periods.



A reasonable level of anxiety that is experienced because of a real threat or danger and then goes away is not regarded as a disorder. But if anxiety or fear prevents you from going out with the babies, you experience panic attacks, or have symptoms that won't go away, you may need professional help.

Although depression and anxiety can occur together, anxiety disorders are different from depression and require different treatment. If you are concerned about you or your partner please talk to your GP, Child Health Nurse or other chosen health professional.

Management strategies for early parenthood

Advice offered in 'mainstream' literature to parents may be frustrating as it often does not acknowledge the unique challenges faced by parents of more than one baby. The following lists have been developed especially for you...

For mothers

“Everyone says do what you think is right, but I don't think anymore. I underestimated the tiredness. I never thought I'd feel like I couldn't cope and that I'd cry all the time. Sleep has almost become an obsession.”

Mother of twins

“People with single birth babies will constantly give you advice as to potty training, bottle feeding etc. But remember, we with multiples have to do things very differently. Just say 'thanks for your advice' then ask someone who really knows what they're talking about.”

Mother of triplets

“I sometimes feel like I need help with things but I don't want to ask as I don't want to seem useless and I sometimes feel like a good whinge but I wouldn't as people will think I'm a sook.”

Mother of twins

- **Look after your own physical health.** Make sure that you make time to eat nutritious food. You need fuel to function.
- **Extend your support systems and use them.** Accept all reasonable offers of help. It's often helpful if someone else can cook meals while you feed the babies or care for the babies while you eat, sleep, shower, dress or take 'time out'. It can be very useful to have contact with other new parents or to join local groups, particularly multiple-specific groups as they understand the unique challenges and joys of caring for multiple babies.

- **If you have a partner, involve them** in the care of the new babies from the beginning. Praise their attempts to help, even if they don't do things the way you do. It's more useful to suggest other methods than to criticise. The same applies to household chores and responsibilities.
- **Find methods of stress relief that work for you and use them daily.** Caring for babies is a stressful job and you need an effective way of releasing the stress. Read a book, watch your favourite TV show, go for a walk, meditate, have a cup of tea or take a relaxing bath. A couple of minutes of 'time out' is better than nothing.
- **Try not to spend all day in your pyjamas!** Having a shower and getting dressed each morning sounds easy, but it can be hard to find the time. But it's worth the effort – looking better can help you feel better.
- **Modify the expectations you have of yourself** in relation to housework, especially in the first few months. Try to make your life as simple as possible and only do things that are essential. Try to sleep or rest when the babies are sleeping. This is not the time to catch up on all the household chores.
- **Try to maintain social contacts.** This requires extra planning with new babies, but it is important for your own well-being and your relationships with others. Social isolation is a common problem for mothers of multiples and it takes effort to make sure you maintain contact with the 'outside world'. If you haven't already, make contact with the Australian Multiple Birth Association – do not underestimate the benefits of talking to other mothers of multiples.
- **Have regular check ups** with your local Child Health Nurse and remember it's important to discuss your own feelings and concerns as well as your babies' health. Don't be afraid to ask questions of health professionals. If you don't receive enough or clear information, ask more questions or go and see another professional.
- **Make sure there is a light at the end of the tunnel.** The 'light' doesn't have to be big or expensive but should be regular (e.g. once a week, fortnight or month). It could be coffee with friends, a weekend away, a facial, a trip to the hairdresser, buying a magazine or giving yourself a manicure/pedicure at home.
- **Trust your own judgement** and remind yourself that things will become more manageable as you adjust to your new role as a mother of multiples.



For fathers

“I am finding it hard to balance demands at home and at work, basically due to lack of sleep.”

Father of twins

“I’m trying to do the right thing but knowing sometimes I’ll make a mistake and have my partner understand my mistakes and talk about them rather than arguing and causing distress to ourselves and the twins.”

Father of twins

- **Actively become involved** in the care of your new family.
- **Be aware of your own health and well-being** and seek professional help if you feel anxious or depressed.
- **Be aware of your stress levels.** Fathers can feel like the weight of the world is on their shoulders, especially if they are the sole wage earner for their family. Leisure time is important but will need to be planned for now. Find healthy ways of relieving stress like a sport, exercise or hobby and negotiate with your partner so that you both get an opportunity for ‘down time’.
- **Share your feelings and concerns** with someone you trust.
- **Encourage your partner to seek professional help** if needed and even go with her.
- **Provide reassurance and support to your partner.** Try to be understanding of your partner’s needs and modify your expectations of her.
- **Be aware that women often have decreased sexual desire following childbirth.** Show affection and intimacy without the pressure for sex.

As a couple

“We have had to become closer, learn to work very effectively as a team on minimal communication. Tolerate weaknesses, each being able to do most kinds of work. Our relationship will be stronger because of it.”

Father of twins

- **Plan some time together as a couple** and do some activities together that you enjoyed before you had your babies or just talk without interruptions.

- **Find someone reliable and trustworthy who can baby-sit for you** so you can spend time alone or plan social activities. Asking someone to care for two or more infants may be a bit overwhelming, so try asking two or more different people to take one baby each. It is beneficial for the babies to have 'alone' time too – when they can be the centre of attention.
- **If you have older children**, occasionally organise with your partner to alternate care for the babies while the other spends one-on-one time with older siblings.
- **Trust your own judgement.** Listen to advice from others, but be selective in what you choose to follow. Most people will not have dealt with the unique issues a parent with multiples may face. People may be well-intentioned in their advice, but remember you are the parents.
- **Try not to make major life changes** (e.g. move house, renovate, change jobs) in the first few months after having your babies.
- **Stock up on supplies.** With double, triple or quadruple the demand, baby supplies are used at a rapid rate. To save you having to make multiple trips to the shops try to buy as many baby supplies and basics (e.g. milk and bread – then freeze) as you can afford at a time. But hold onto receipts just in case.
- **Buy or hire a good pram.** One of the hardest parts of managing multiples is leaving the house when you have more babies than hands. A good pram makes it much easier. The Australian Multiple Birth Association has prams for hire.
- **There is often a greater amount of attention given to multiple birth babies when out in public.** Many parents enjoy the extra attention they receive but it may take a while to get used to. The attention, though well-meaning and mostly positive, can become annoying and upsetting for some parents (especially if you're having a bad day). People who have no experience with multiple birth families may say things that can appear insensitive, try not to take such comments personally as they are usually said with good intentions. A sense of humour and pre-prepared witty come-backs can come in handy.
- **Organisation in the face of chaos.** With more than one baby in the house there will inevitably be times when there is chaos. How much did she eat? When's the last time he had a wet nappy? Which baby are you anyway? Setting up an organised system for keeping track of things will ensure that everyone's needs are met. Make a chart to track feeding times and amounts, nappy changes, medications and other important information. A dab of nail polish on one toe is helpful for telling your babies apart.



- **Focus on priorities.** Keep it simple. Let things go. Your focus during the first few months with multiples should be on you and your newly expanded family. It's not the time to cook gourmet meals, do spring cleaning or learn a new hobby. Focus on caring for your new bundles of joy and yourself, and let the little things slide. You'll have time to catch up on things a few months down the road, when your multiples have established some sort of routine.
- **Be flexible.** A textbook approach doesn't work with multiple babies. Every family has different habits and needs and the 'right' way is really whatever works best for your family. You may need to try a variety of schedules, products, and techniques. Remember that your babies are individuals and so what works for one may not be right for another.
- **Try and keep things in perspective.** No matter how bad things get, they are temporary. Babies grow up. They will begin to sleep more, eat less often and it will get easier to take them out of the house.

Treatment options

There are many options available to parents with depression and/or anxiety. We suggest in the first instance telling your GP, Child Health Nurse, Midwife, Obstetrician or other health professional that you are experiencing some distressing feelings. In some cases being able to acknowledge and talk about your feelings gives those around you the chance to reassure and support you in finding the help you need.

Options include:

Individual counselling – the counsellor listens to your problems in a non-judgemental way and provides support to help you work through them.

Psychological treatment – therapy aims to provide support and teach you strategies to deal with symptoms while addressing the underlying factors that may have increased your vulnerability to developing problems.

Couple counselling – the couple relationship changes during pregnancy and early parenthood and any communication difficulties between partners may be highlighted. Counselling helps couples work effectively together and assists their adjustment to the changes experienced before and after childbirth.

Support groups – these include local self-help groups conducted by people who have experienced the same sorts of problems, or support groups which provide an opportunity to share experiences, hear useful information and develop strategies to overcome difficulties.

Medication – while effective for some people, generally shouldn't be used alone and should be accompanied by counselling, therapy or other support services. Medication may have side effects. Your doctor will be able to advise you on the use of medication and which antidepressants are safe to take during pregnancy and/or breastfeeding.

Admission to hospital or mother-baby unit – occasionally a woman may experience anxiety or depression so severely that there may be risk of harm to herself or her babies. In-patient admission to a mother-baby unit or hospital is an important consideration. If your state has a unit, they provide a safe place for a mother and her babies to be monitored 24-hours a day. Some centres also provide programs for women and their partners to deal with couple issues, parenting skills and the mother-infant relationships. Residential mothercraft centres may also be able to offer in-patient stay to resolve infant-related behavioural problems (e.g. regulating sleep-feed cycles).

Deciding what treatment is right for you

Which option is going to be most helpful for you is a personal decision which should be made in conjunction with a health professional familiar with depression and anxiety. Which treatment is recommended by your health professional will depend on your individual circumstances.

Keeping in mind what has been recommended for you, you may like to try a couple of different things out and see which one you feel most comfortable with. Perhaps one-on-one is more your style or you may prefer a group setting. Some people actually find that more than one option is useful at different times during their treatment. Speaking to other parents about what they have found helpful can be a good place to start.



Resources

Suggested reading list

The Australian Breastfeeding Association publishes a booklet on breastfeeding twins and another on breastfeeding higher order multiples. Copies are available to purchase on their website www.breastfeeding.asn.au or by phoning the Association on (03) 9885 0855

The Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA) publishes a selection of information pamphlets which range in price from 50 cents to \$6 and can be purchased through AMBA. Topics include: pre-term labour, hospitalisation, breast/bottle feeding and bereavement. The AMBA also produces a wonderful informational DVD entitled *The Multiple Birth Video Guide*, available to purchase from their website www.amba.org.au

Many AMBA clubs have libraries which may stock some of the following book titles, but if you can't find them at your local library or bookstore, www.amazon.com stocks most of them.

Agnew, C, Klein, A, & Ganon, J. (2006)

Twins! Pregnancy, Birth and the First Year of Life. New York: Collins Living

Bowers, N. (2001)

The Multiple Pregnancy Sourcebook: Pregnancy and the First Days with Twins, Triplets, and More. Illinois, USA: Contemporary Books

Bowman, E, & Ryan, L. (2005)

Twins: A Practical and Emotional Guide to Parenting Twins. Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd

Davis, D, & Stein, M. (2004)

Parenting Your Premature Baby and Child: The Emotional Journey. Fulcrum Publishing

Fettling, L. (2002)

Postnatal Depression: A Practical Guide for Australian Families. Melbourne: IP Communications

Kirbo, H. (2008)

Triple Treasures: Our Journey from Infertility through the First Year with Triplets. BookSurge Publishing

Lage, C. (2006)

Twinspiration: Real Life Advice from Pregnancy through the First Year for Parents of Twins and Multiples. Taylor Trade Publishing

Lorenz, L. (2007)

The Multiples Manual: Preparing and Caring for Twins or Triplets. Just Multiples.Com

Luke, B, & Eberlein, T. (2004)

When You're Expecting Twins, Triplets or Quads: A Complete Resource. HarperResouce

Lyons, E. (2007)

Ready or Not Here We Come!: The Real Experts Guide to the First Year With Twins. Finn-Phyllis Press, Inc.

Malmstrom, P, & Poland, J. (1999)

The Art of Parenting Twins: The Unique Joys and Challenges of Raising Twins and Other Multiples. Ballantine Books

Regan-Loomis, M. (2008)

Juggling Twins: The Best Tips, Tricks, and Strategies from Pregnancy to the Toddler Years. Sourcebooks Inc.

Scalise, D. (2008)

Twin Sense: A Sanity-Saving Guide to Raising Twins from Pregnancy through the First Year. AMACOM

Websites

MULTIPLE BIRTH-SPECIFIC – AUSTRALIAN

Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA)

www.amba.org.au

The AMBA website provides information and contact details for parents of multiples across Australia. The website has recently been updated and there is useful information about becoming a member, a community forum, publication reviews, a valuable section on bereavement, and you can download the AMBA eJournal.



Perth and Districts Multiple Birth Association

www.mbawa.org.au

This West Australian Multiple Birth Association has its own website with an active online discussion forum, blog and newsletter, making it a great way for parents to connect.

Two, Four, Six, Eight: Educating Twins, Triplets and More

www.twinsandmultiples.org

This website provides information and downloadable materials with regard to the educational needs of multiple birth children. The site contains a wealth of information for parents and teachers.

MULTIPLE BIRTH-SPECIFIC – INTERNATIONAL

The following sites belong to overseas multiple birth organisations. They are worth a visit for Australian parents as they still contain useful information and networking opportunities.

Expecting Multiples – Multiple Birth Resources

www.expectingmultiples.com

Multiple Births Canada

www.multiplebirthscanada.org

Mothers of SuperTwins (MOST)

www.mostonline.org

Parenting Multiples

<http://multiples.about.com>

Post-Natal Depression Support Association of South Africa (PNDSA)

www.pndsa.co.za

Postpartum Support International (PSI)

www.postpartum.net

The Multiple Births Foundation (MBF)

www.multiplebirths.org.uk

The Triplet Connection

www.tripletconnection.org

Twins and Higher Order Multiple Birth Association (TAMBA)

www.tamba.org.uk

Twins Magazine

www.twinsmagazine.com

PARENTS DEALING WITH ILL HEALTH OR LOSS

The following websites provide information and support for families dealing with the death of an infant or facing the additional challenges presented when caring for ill babies.

Angel Babies Forever Loved

www.angels4ever.com/multiples

AustPrem

www.austprem.org.au

Center for Loss in Multiple Birth (CLIMB) Inc.

www.climb-support.org

Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome Australia Inc.

www.twin-twin.org

Twin2Twin

www.twin2twin.org

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

These websites contain useful information on pre and postnatal depression, anxiety, and stress including further details of services and resources available for Australian parents and health professionals.

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

www.beyondblue.org.au

WA Perinatal Mental Health Unit

www.yourzone.com.au/perinatalhealth/

St John of God Health Care, Raphael Centre

www.sjog.org.au/mhp/raphael

PaNDa

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~panda/>



Services

Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA)

'Support from those who know'

The Australian Multiple Birth Association (AMBA) is a voluntary organisation concerned with the well-being of multiple birth families. AMBA aims to provide information, practical assistance and support for multiple birth families. AMBA provides a valuable means of communication for sharing information on the care and raising of multiple birth children.

Annual membership fees to local Multiple Birth Association clubs entitle members to a range of services including: hospital visits, a monthly newsletter, library, parent contacts, coffee groups, special needs register, bereavement support, help register, equipment hire (additional cost), and social meetings/events.

The AMBA has clubs located throughout Australia. See the AMBA website for local club contact details for each state www.amba.org.au or call 1300 886 499.

Health professionals

A good source of information and support is your General Practitioner or Child Health Nurse (contact details under Department of Health in Yellow/White Pages). The Yellow/White Pages will also have contact numbers for private practitioners in sections listed for psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors.

The *beyondblue* website www.beyondblue.org.au provides information on getting help, including a Directory of Medical and Allied Health Practitioners in Mental Health and an info line 1300 22 4636.

Local Community/Women's Health Centre

Your Local Community/Women's Health Centre can provide information about services they offer or refer on to other appropriate agencies. Many also provide individual counselling and postnatal depression support groups. Telephone your local centre (see Yellow/White Pages under 'Community Health Centre' or 'Child Health Centres').

National Information and Help Lines

<i>beyondblue</i> info line	1300 22 4636 (local call)
Australian Multiple Birth Association	1300 886 499
Lifeline	13 11 14
Suicide Call Back Service	1300 659 467
Australian Psychological Society Referral Line	1800 333 497
Mensline Australia	1300 78 99 78
Kids Helpline	1800 551 800
Relationships Australia	1300 364 277

For an up-to-date list of resources, please visit

www.beyondblue.org.au or call the
***beyondblue* info line on 1300 22 4636**





Helping someone through perinatal depression isn't beyond you.

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PO Box 6100, Hawthorn West VIC 3122

beyondblue info line: 1300 22 4636

Administration phone: (03) 9810 6100

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APRIL 2009

For more information www.beyondblue.org.au or *beyondblue* info line 1300 22 4636