



CONNECTING WITH BABIES ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

For parents with kids in mind...

Whether it's you or your partner who's well, unwell or becoming well, how you communicate with your baby is really important. Even tiny babies can pick up on and react to situations you might not notice.

Be prepared

When you and your partner understand the illness you'll be more comfortable interacting with your child. You can research the illness yourself or ask your health professional for information.

- **Research** | There is a lot of information about mental illness, the types of support and treatments available on the internet. SANE Australia and beyondblue have credible information on their websites — www.sane.org.au | www.beyondblue.org.au
- **Consult a professional** | Learn to understand the illness by discussing it with a GP or mental health professional. Ask questions and speak about your personal experiences. Keep in mind that it can take time finding a health professional you feel comfortable with and has the right fit for you.

When you understand the illness, you'll be more familiar with how it affects emotions, behaviours or moods. This will help you and your partner develop your own way of communicating that is comfortable for you and your child. COPMI's *The Best for Me and My Baby* booklet provides advice for parents with a mental illness. Order a copy or download it from the website (details below).

Babies take cues

Babies are very sensitive to their parents' moods. They are able to observe how their parents are feeling by reading their facial expressions and tone of voice. They'll do this to decide how to respond to certain situations. For example, when a new person appears, they'll observe their parents first to decide whether they're 'safe'. Parents communicate with and reassure their babies using their voice and facial expressions. Babies observe or 'read' how their parents are feeling in the same way. So if you're not feeling well, try being aware of your behaviour around them.

Sometimes when parents are overwhelmed or distressed, they might be tempted to seek comfort from their baby. But disturbing a baby that's quietly exploring or self-occupied with play; or patting a baby that's not upset can confuse or unsettle him or her.

Take time to listen to and watch your baby's way of communicating with you. If you're having difficulty reading or

understanding their signals, seek advice from a health or early childhood worker or child and maternal health nurse. You might find information on the Raising Children Network website helpful (www.raisingchildren.net.au | look for *Babies: Connecting and Communicating*). There is also a Parentline in each Australian State. Locate yours in your telephone directory or visit online at www.parentline.com.au.

Tips for managing distress

- **Parents** | When parents are distressed, tired or in a low mood they can find it hard being with or interacting with their baby. If this happens to you, try reassuring your baby by saying something like "Mummy/Daddy is feeling sad right now, but I love looking at you and seeing you look back at me" in a calm voice with a gentle face.
- **Babies** | Sometimes parents find a distressed or crying baby increases their own stress and it's difficult to cope with. Try managing your own feelings before soothing and helping an upset baby. If you're really distressed and find it hard coping with your baby's needs, try finding someone you trust to be with your baby while you take a break. You might need to relax, call the Parent Helpline, or do something else you know works for you.
- **Relationship** | Parents sometimes feel a strain in the relationship with their baby or find it hard to feel love for them. If this is true for you, speak to a health worker. In this situation, it's important you persist to get the support you need. Your relationship with your baby can improve.

Looking after yourself

Looking after yourself and seeking help when needed is important for you and your baby. When you are looking after your own health, you are modelling behaviour your child can notice — as your child grows they'll learn to take care of their own mental and physical health too.



Talk to someone | Get more info

Lifeline | 13 11 14 1 Kids Helpline | 1800 551 800

beyondblue | 1300 22 4636 | www.beyondblue.org.au

SANE Australia | 1800 18 SANE (7263) | www.sane.org

www.copmi.net.au | 77 King William Street, North Adelaide SA 5006 | 08 8367 0888

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