

Bromley,
Lewisham
& Greenwich



Wellbeing skills
for new dads
partners & non-birthing parents



Having a baby can be a daunting prospect, bringing new responsibilities and a sense of the unknown. If you are feeling that coping is a concern, you are not alone.

This booklet and accompanying **Better mental health** aim to help you navigate the early years as a new dad or co-parent, maintain good mental wellbeing for yourself and support your new family.

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Having difficult conversations with your partner

Focus on solutions

Ultimately, both of you are trying to solve a problem. Pushing your own views or trying to prove you are right will make your problems harder, not easier, to solve. Keep your mind open to your partner's ideas.

Choose a good time

Use your judgement here; avoid times when you are both tired or focussed on something else, e.g. making dinner.

Be positive

Start your conversation constructively. Open with phrases like 'Thanks for talking about [issue] with me. It's so much better when we talk things through together'. This helps to reassure that, ultimately, you are aiming to find a solution together.

Keep to the subject

Avoid bringing up old issues or arguments into the current conversation. If your partner can't avoid doing so, gently bring the conversation back. Phrases like 'I know that is an issue as well' and 'I'm happy to talk about it at another time' can help re-centre your conversation.

Listen to your partner

This point is so important, we've given it its own section (see [How to listen](#)) on how to do it properly. Here all we will say is that true listening requires your undivided attention.

Avoid blame

- Blame makes people defensive and defensiveness is often unpredictable. Everyone feels hurt and angry and problems stay resolutely unsolved.
- Look for common ground. If you can, agree on something, no matter how small and use it to promote understanding and co-operation in other areas.

If it gets too much, take a break

Even with the best intentions, there can come a point where you start to feel angry. If this happens, take time out. If you sense your partner is headed that way, offer them a break too. Remember you're after a solution, not a victory.



How to listen

Our most meaningful relationships cannot thrive unless we know how to listen well. Listening is one of the most essential skills we can master.

Give your undivided attention

Despite seeming obvious, this is the bit most people don't do well. It's vital to look at the person you're speaking to, focus on what they are saying and their body language.

Give your partner space and time to talk

- Place the focus on them and try not to relate the topic back to yourself too much.
- You could simply nod as you listen or say 'yes'. This encourages the person you're listening to, to continue to be open.
- Reflect back what you've understood, e.g. "So, are you saying that..."

You don't need to have all the answers

Avoid jumping in with solutions or your own thoughts on a problem. Silence can be golden; it allows the person to gather their thoughts. Just be mindful to show you are still listening.



It's worth practising these skills whenever you have the chance, perhaps with a friend.

How to calm yourself

No matter what your situation, there will be times when you feel like everything is getting on top of you. Stress and anxiety when you've had a baby can be completely normal. The good news is there is much you can do to reduce these feelings.

Most worries are fuelled either by mentally projecting forward to a potential future situation or dwelling on a past negative experience. When we focus on the current moment, we remove the fuel. Here are some proven techniques to help you do this.

Breathe

Taking a short, deep breath in, followed by a long, slow breath out, reduces the level of Cortisol (stress hormone) in the body. This makes you feel less anxious.

Close your eyes and breathe like this 10 times. Focus on making your 'out breath' as long as is comfortable. Some people find the 'in for 4, out for 6' breath works well.

Find a simple, repetitive and tactile activity. Something as simple as having a shave or painting a wall can have the desired effect; they are actions that require you to focus on the present moment.

Use a different sense

Take some time and focus on your other senses. Close your eyes and take in the sounds around you, moving your focus between the different sounds. Run your hands over different surfaces and absorb the way they feel. When you open your eyes again, really notice the things you look at.

Exercise

Do you know why people talk about the health benefits of exercising?

Because it's true.

- Find an activity that boosts your heart rate and gets you moving.
- Try to avoid unhealthy activities like smoking and drinking alcohol; they really don't help you in the long run.

The NHS offers free **Stop Smoking services** www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/stop-smoking and **advice on alcohol** www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support

Conversation starters

Pointers for approaching a variety of subjects with a variety of people.

For the health visitor

If baby isn't sleeping or seems unsettled or anything.

"What do you suggest that is a good way to..."

For your partner

General conversation but not every day.

"How are you doing?"

"How are we doing?"

"What's one thing that you would find helpful?"

For your mates

If they have children.

"Wow! This is better than I thought."
"Damn! This is tougher than I thought."

If they don't.

"Can I have 5 minutes to bore you about my (wonderful) daughter/son?"

For family

"Thank you for all your support; please can you...?"



How to cope with negative thoughts

We all have days when life just seems to be getting on top of us. As a parent of small children, it can happen quite frequently. Negative emotions (anger, sadness, jealousy, etc.) are hard to avoid but they don't have to control your life.

Differentiate between emotions and thoughts

- Don't just hide your emotions away; take a moment to acknowledge them.
- You are not trying to hide away from negative emotions; rather, you are keeping them in perspective.

Challenge automatic negative thoughts

Anything you do frequently can be habit-forming; this includes patterns of thought.

Examples like 'I'm rubbish at this' or 'I never get things right' feed into a spiral of anxiety, which affects your mental wellbeing, stifles your ability to face problems and creates a negative cycle.

The good news is that automatic negative thoughts are just that... thoughts. They can be challenged and overcome.

- Recognise when you're thinking automatic negative thoughts
- Keep a note of which negative thoughts most affect your mood, and how
- Use this info to challenge your thought patterns e.g. am I really a bad parent? Or do I assume everyone else is better?
- If you tend to dwell on thoughts of bad things happening (catastrophising), try asking yourself not whether an outcome is possible but whether it is likely.
- Think about what you would say to a friend who was feeling the way you are. Show yourself the same compassion.

Talk to someone

Get social support from a trusted person or professional.

Gratitude

Keep a short daily journal of the things you're grateful for. It can help you to restore some balance to your thoughts.

Building a sustainable routine

Family, work and sleep. These three areas account for most of your life now (sleep being the very poor relation). It can feel like there's no time left for you in all this. Here are some tips to help you make the most of the time you do have.

Change your perception

Leisure time comes in much smaller chunks when we become parents. Think of ways to maximise the joy of the 'small moments' - going for short walks or reading, for example. Accept that all-day leisure events may have to take a back seat for a while.

Build it together

Work with your partner to see where you can help make time for each other.

Find your happy

Think how you can gain maximum satisfaction from the time you have. Look at what daily activities make you happy and which less so (use a routine planner to help you).

Using a routine planner

A daily routine planner can be easily found by a quick internet search; use it to get an idea of how your day / week works. Write down all the things you do on each day along with a symbol to show whether the activity makes you happy or not.

The more detailed you are, the more useful the plan will be in helping you get the most of your time. Something as simple as noting that you enjoyed walking to the station or that first cup of tea is very useful!

Once you have a full chart, you can easily look and see the things that you liked doing and the things you liked less. Then you can work out how to re-balance things to suit you.

Ask your partner to complete a routine chart as well; then you compare, learning more about each other's day as you do. You'll then be able to work more as a team, making changes to help each other get just a little bit more joy from the little moments.

Once you've planned your routine with your partner to find out what works best for you and your family, use this info as your base for creating a better work-life balance.



**“Free time?
What is that?”**

Every parent, ever!

Working on your relationship with your partner

You have a baby. Which means that now, more than ever, the most important relationship in your life is.... your relationship with your partner. It's probably fair to say that the two of you have a lot going on right now. You're trying to find a new way of living, working and being together and using reserves you didn't know you had.

Small is beautiful

- Moments that could once have been built up to over a leisurely dinner now get a slot between feeds.
- Think of little ways to demonstrate affection in the time you have. Even an extra hug or a hand-hold can make a big difference to the connection between you.

Make time

- Obviously time cannot be created. But it can be re-purposed.
- You can free up more time for each other by taking moments that you probably didn't even consider to be 'time' (whilst making a cup of tea, or pushing the buggy, for instance) and consciously using it to work on your connection with each other.
- Use your routine planner to help (see [Building a sustainable routine](#)).

Expand on intimacy

- We can sometimes focus on the physical aspects of intimacy over all others. After a baby is born, sex naturally takes a back seat and it can be a while before you get to focus on it again. This is a good time to work on the other areas of intimacy that make a relationship thrive.
- Play a song that holds good memories for you both; hold hands and appreciate the moment the baby finally went to sleep; sit together on the sofa.
- Actions like these help you build emotional intimacy; keep working on them.



Developing your patience

The most important quality in a parent is patience. What's that you say? Love?! That's the easy bit! Patience takes effort, but it will save your sanity and help you raise more emotionally stable children.

Count to 10

This is not a flippant answer. It is an effective way of allowing you time to calm down and long enough for you to think clearly again.

Learn your triggers

Note down the situations that create most stress between you and your little one and how often it happens. This can help you to work out coping strategies.

Try to empathise with your child

- What is going on for them in that moment?
- How are they feeling?

Find ways to release tension built up from other situations

- Try exercising or using breathing techniques (see [How To Calm Yourself](#)).
- Sometimes your patience can be worn away by other events; your child can just be the one who used up the last bit.

Small children dance to their own rhythm!

Try to alter your mindset when you are with them and allow them plenty of time.



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**Healthy London
Partnership**

We want this booklet to be as inclusive as possible whilst making sure it connects and is relevant. If you are LGBT+ and you don't see **your** experience reflected in here, you may be able to find more help from the resources in our signposting section of our **Better mental health for new dads & partners** booklet.

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