



Communicating with your baby when you have a mental illness

Babies can pick up even subtle changes in mood and behaviour when their parent is unwell.

This resource will help you to connect with your baby when you are unwell so that they feel secure and nurtured. It steps you through:

- understanding your symptoms and behaviours.
- thinking about what your baby notices and experiences.
- communicating with your baby to support a nurturing connection.

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your baby views what is happening. It may be useful to talk with your health professional or another support person about the impact of your mental illness on your role as a parent.

Understanding your symptoms and behaviours

Emotions, behaviours and moods affect how you view yourself and how others view you. They also affect your relationships with others, including with your baby.

When you are unwell, it is important to be aware of how your symptoms can influence your behaviours, facial expressions and tone of voice. These are the changes that will be noticed by your baby.

The first important step in preparing to think about this is to reflect on the symptoms you experience and the behaviours your baby sees. Then consider how these might affect how your baby feels. You can do this with a partner, a friend, a health professional or on your own.



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I guess I never really thought about the fact that he could pick up what was going on with me. I thought he was just too little to understand that anything was wrong.”

Sarah, NSW parent

A reflective exercise

Do not do this activity if you are unwell today

Think about the symptoms you experience and the behaviours that others may notice. Mark the symptoms and behaviours in the list below to get started.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking and moving slowly | <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling to concentrate | <input type="checkbox"/> Very tired |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying a lot | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing or hearing things | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping a lot |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suspicious thoughts | <input type="checkbox"/> Low motivation | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritable, short-tempered |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traumatic flashbacks | <input type="checkbox"/> Not mixing with others | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry outbursts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad or teary | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over-sensitive | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harm | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling numb | |

Are there any others? List these below.

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Write five of the symptoms or behaviours that worry you the most at the top of the circles below. Focus on those that impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your baby might see, hear and feel when they are with you. Write your thoughts in the lower part of the circles below.

<div><p>Symptom or behaviour:</p><p>.....</p><p>What does my child see, hear and feel?</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p></div>	<div><p>Symptom or behaviour:</p><p>.....</p><p>What does my child see, hear and feel?</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p></div>	<div><p>Symptom or behaviour:</p><p>.....</p><p>What does my child see, hear and feel?</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p><p>.....</p></div>
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Understanding what your baby notices and experiences

Although babies might not understand everything you say, they are very sensitive and responsive to your emotions and your tone of voice. You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions your baby's responses may also change.

Take time to listen and watch your baby's way of communicating with you. If you are having difficulty reading or understanding their signals, seek advice from a health or early childhood worker or Child Family Health Nurse. You might find information from the Raising Children Network 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.

Babies: babies cry and sometimes it can be hard to understand their distress. Your baby will be looking for you to respond.

Parents: Parents can find a distressed or crying baby increases their own stress. When this happens take a moment to try and manage your own feelings before soothing your upset baby. Use a quiet reassuring voice as you move closer to be with your baby.

Your relationship with your baby: Parents may sometimes feel they cannot understand their child's needs. If you are

feeling overwhelmed by your babies needs set a time when you can find someone you trust to be with your baby while you take a break. You can then use this time to relax or to call the Parent Helpline, talk to a child maternal health nurse or your doctor.

Communicating with your baby to support a nurturing connection

You don't need to explain mental illness to your baby. When you are with your baby, it is important to find ways to connect with them to help them feel nurtured and secure.

Some tips include:

- smile when you look at your baby.
- maintain eye contact with your baby until they look away.
- hold your baby close and cuddle them.
- give your baby a massage.
- gently rock your baby and talk in a soothing voice when they are upset.
- use a warm, calm, 'sing-song' voice when you speak to your baby.
- smile and nod when your baby make sounds.
- encourage your baby's little noises by repeating their sounds when they finish their 'sentence' to create your own two-way 'conversation'.

For more information on managing mental health during pregnancy and early parenthood download or order a copy of the COPMI booklet '*The Best for Me and My baby*'.

www.copmi.net.au/me-and-baby

