

We need to understand that if a mother wanted to exclusively breastfeed and then ends up mixed feeding or formula feeding, she might suffer intense feelings of guilt, sadness, disappointment in herself, and grief. We need to acknowledge and support her through these feelings in a compassionate way.

But we also should remember that many mothers who struggled with breastfeeding challenges and PND, yet persevered through the challenges, often reported that breastfeeding was the one thing that kept them afloat and enabled them to attach and bond with their baby. And that in the long term, mums who breastfeed and enjoy the experience, have lower rates of PND than formula feedings mums.

If you are a breastfeeding mum

If you are breastfeeding and are having challenges with feeding:

- Make sure you get the support you need as early as possible, both practical support for your feeding challenges and emotional support, as this can be so hard.
- Remember that it can take four to six weeks to really establish breastfeeding and overcome challenges, be patient and keep seeking help.
- But if it has been longer than this, you got expert lactation support and things are still not working for you in terms of feeding, please remember that the most important thing is the bond between you and your baby, not how you feed your baby. Your baby needs your love, attention to their cues and responsive care much more than anything else.
- If breastfeeding did not work well for you this time, please allow yourself to grieve and seek emotional support for your grief. Know this does not mean you are not a good mum or that you won't be able to feed your next baby.

Always remember - a child needs a mother who can give her love and bond with her, who is calm, rested and loving. If breastfeeding challenges are interfering with this, and is making the anxiety or depression worse, it is our failure as a system, it is not yours as a mum!

Contact Us

Phone: +64 4 461 6318
 General enquiries: office@pada.nz



BF was the only thing that kept me going this time around. I was feeling disconnected with my baby and keeping BF going was the only healing thing".

I grew to love the bonding, I grew to love the peaceful moments. Aside from the initial experience, I believe that breastfeeding was therapeutic and healing for my PND.

The first 6 weeks of my daughters' life breastfeeding definitely contributed to my PND. But once we got over that hurdle things started to get better...



Breastfeeding and perinatal distress

Research demonstrates statistical connections between challenging breastfeeding experiences and adverse consequences in maternal mental health, with a significant relationship between worries about breastfeeding and an increased risk of depression.

A mother who is experiencing challenges in her breastfeeding, such as low milk supply or pain, will be deeply emotionally affected. And if this mum is also receiving or perceiving pressure from society and the people surrounding her to keep breastfeeding in spite of these challenges - without getting the right support - the impact of these difficulties can be much worse for her mental health.

Can breastfeeding be a protective factor for maternal mental health?

Mothers who are emotionally unwell, often feel breastfeeding is the one thing they feel they were doing right. It helps them reconnect with their infant, when the rest of the time they felt detached, disconnected, and anxious.

"Breastfeeding created huge sleep deprivation, BUT it was the only thing that I knew I was doing right and that my baby needed - so it also kept me going."

Recent research suggest that the breastfeeding hormones, oxytocin and prolactin, can promote feelings of well-being, relaxation and nurture. Furthermore, when oxytocin is released, cortisol, our stress hormone, decreases, and we feel calm and sleepy. Additional research suggests that reduced inflammation linked to breastfeeding reduces the risk of depression. A healthier baby may also decrease the chances of recurring illnesses or fussiness which leads to emotional challenges for parents.

Research and our experience as practitioners shows us that, when mums overcome the first challenging weeks, seek help for breastfeeding issues, get the right support and advice - and then go on to breastfeed for many weeks, months or years, their sense of pride, self-efficacy and achievement, combined with the hormonal and health benefits, results in lower rates of PND in the long term for breastfeeding women.



PADA

Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Aotearoa is the national organisation committed to eliminating the stigma around perinatal mental health in New Zealand. We do this by championing awareness and facilitating best practice in perinatal mental health and wellbeing to ensure all families/whanau have access to appropriate information and support.

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