



Supporting Parents & Relationships

About Relate NI

Relate NI is passionate about enabling good quality relationships and that's why our mission is to make expert information and support for healthy relationships available to everyone. Through our experience of working with people throughout Northern Ireland, we've come to understand that relationships not only give our lives meaning, they are of vital importance to our happiness.

For the last 70+ years, we have been supporting the health and wellbeing of children & young people, individuals, couples, and families through our therapeutic services because we know how important our relationships are to our health and wellbeing.

Relate NI continues to provide support services at this time, in order to ensure that people and communities have access to high quality, professional health and wellbeing support and relationship support.

Visit our website for more guidance on how to Relieve the Pressure on you and your relationships.

About The Parent Rooms

Relate NI are working with The Parent Rooms (formerly We Are Pangs) to focus on supporting Perinatal and Maternal Mental Health in Northern Ireland to support new parents and families through our counselling services.

The Parent Rooms run Perinatal Peer Support Groups hosted by trained peer support leaders who have their own experience of mental health who have been supporting perinatal mental health in NI since 2014. They also provide access to wellbeing programs that build self-confidence, resilience and coping strategies, and social events to create a circle of support around parents who are working through personal struggles.

For more information or to access this new perinatal mental health service, visit www.theparentrooms.co.uk/our-services or email hello@theparentrooms.co.uk

Introduction

Becoming a parent, particularly for the first time, can be one of the greatest joys of life but for some, it can also bring with it a range of different emotional experiences and no matter how expected or welcome, a lot of stress from changes to routines.

It is also a time that creates a lot of physical changes, particularly for the mum-to-be or new mum, as well as many psychological and emotional changes for both parents and the wider family unit.

We may tend to worry about what kind of parent we will be, will we be able to cope, both financially and with the new responsibilities of looking after another human being. We may also have to consider the impact on other family members, such as the children we already have and how to help support them to develop a relationship with their new sibling.

For some new parents having a baby can bring up issues from our own childhoods that can impact on our thoughts and feelings about parenting. And of course, managing the sometimes all too helpful in-laws and wider relationships as you navigate new ways of doing things can also be tricky.

For some, pregnancy can lead to or exacerbate already existing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression or feeling out of control. More than 1 in 10 women develop a mental illness during pregnancy or within the first year after having a baby.

At the heart of maternal mental health is relationships. It is widely recognised that one of the best ways to support new parents is by having caring and understanding people that support you through this time of change. At Relate NI we have professionally trained counsellors who understand maternal and paternal health needs and are here to help. We have teamed up with The Parent Rooms (formerly We Are Pangs) and can offer a listening ear in a safe environment, to offer support for the whole family. Our expert counsellors have also put together some of the tips and ideas to help support you and your relationships during the perinatal period.



For Mum

The changes that come with motherhood can bring about all sorts of responses, from joy and excitement to fear and panic. Becoming a parent changes our identity and brings about a huge number of new responsibilities, which at times can feel overwhelming. There can also be a sense of our bodies no longer being our own as we attend a whole series of appointments during the pregnancy and as we nurture this new being inside.

Again, all of this can lead to some natural worries that may be difficult to share with our partner or friends. Having a friendly and understanding counsellor who will listen without judging how you feel or telling you what you *should* do can really help us process the many changes and learn skills to cope or deal with any difficult decision or situations you may be experiencing.



For Baby

Happy mums make happy babies!! So when you are relaxed and feeling confident your baby will feel this too. Of course, family life goes hand in hand with a certain level of daily stress. However, if you are a mum-to-be or new mum who feels they are carrying a burden that would be helped with support of a caring counsellor this makes sense not only for your own health and well-being, but also for your baby.



For Partners

Perinatal mental health is not just a female issue, or one that only affects heterosexual couples, and it is widely recognised that men can suffer after the birth of a child. Paternal mental health issues affect up to 1 in 10 men, who may experience depression or loss of sense of purpose/joy in life, anxiousness or may be overwhelmed by the experience. Feeling incompetent in their role as dad as they come to grips with new routines can affect men's self-esteem, and many men can find it difficult to bond with the new baby. They may also find that the relationship with their partner is impacted as a result and often men feel unable to discuss their experiences with friends or family out of a sense of stigma or loyalty to their partner.

Supporting someone you love experiencing mental health issues, having difficulties building a relationship with the new baby, struggling with feelings of guilt or inadequacy or even experiencing a psychotic episode can be both terrifying and upsetting. As a couple it can be really important to have a safe space to talk about your experiences and emotions with an experienced and understanding counsellor.

Same sex couples can also suffer from mental health issues during pregnancy or family planning. As a minority group, LGBT+ people may face additional societal stressors during pregnancy and as new parents, which impacts on their overall health and wellbeing. These could include the financial costs of technology guided conception or the potential for rejection in social groups or in the healthcare system, whether real or perceived, the anxiety around family planning can negatively impact some LGBT+ parents.

Same sex couple parenting can also bring up some issues around roles and responsibilities that may need negotiated. Open and honest discussion in a safe environment can often be the best way to work out what is accepted as fair within the couple relationship with regards to childcare, household duties, financial responsibilities etc.



For Families

Good quality relationships are also important for children's life chances. Secure relationships in early childhood have been found to act as a buffer for coping with stress; resilience when adjusting to difficulties or change; as well as improved self-esteem. They can also help children meet their developmental milestones - educationally, socially and even physically. Good quality relationships support the health of the whole family where each member can thrive and feel part of.

Tips for Maternal Mental Health

If you are concerned about your mental health during pregnancy or after giving birth, remember you are not alone and help is at hand. It can really help to...

Talk to someone about how you are feeling. This could be your partner, a family member, friend or neighbour or to a health professional, such as your midwife, health visitor or GP who can offer support and signpost you to Maternal Mental Health services, where needed. The Parent Rooms (formerly We Are Pangs) also offer a range of wellbeing programs, peer support and counselling services.

Ask for help. Taking care of a new baby can be exhausting and if you already have other children at home it can be a real stretch to juggle everyone's needs. Ask for help and be specific in what you need; someone to walk the dog, take the other children to school, cook a meal for you all, or to give you some time to yourself for an hour. Negotiate chores and self-care time with your partner and think about who in your wider circle can help out.

Sleep, Rest, Eat. Sounds simple but it is amazing how easy it is to slip out of a routine, especially with a new baby in the house. Remember, your body has gone through so many changes and needs time to recover - look after it!! Sleep when the baby sleeps if you need to or at least put your feet up and rest. Nurture your body with good food and remember to keep well hydrated, especially if you are breastfeeding. If it helps you feel good do some light exercise and get out into fresh air, if possible.

Don't be hard on yourself if you don't get things done. Your day may start with good intentions but can quickly spiral in another direction. Don't beat yourself up if you don't manage to achieve all that you had hoped to - sometimes just getting showered and dressed can be an epic event. Some days are just hard so be kind and compassionate to yourself - there's always another day.

Be Persistent If you feel that your mental health is becoming difficult to manage and you don't feel that you have been heard *DO* be persistent - go back to your GP or health visitor if things don't feel any better. If you feel that you or your baby is at risk of harm call 999 immediately.



Concerned about Others?

If you are concerned about someone you know. It can really help to...

Talk to them about it. They may be resistant or defensive at first but normalising how difficult it can be to be a new or expectant parent can be reassuring and may help them to eventually open up.

Offer help & support. Again, some new parents may initially refuse. Be gentle but persistent and perhaps offer something specific you can do to help out - taking other children to give the parents a break for a few hours or bringing around a meal can take some stress out of the day.

Suggest professional support. If you feel there are maternal mental health concerns you can support them to speak to a mental health professional who can help. Initially they may wish to speak to their midwife, GP or health visitor who can refer on to further support, such as counselling or mental health support services. Alternatively, you can contact the GP or Social Services to share any concerns you may have.

Act without delay. If you have any serious concerns about risk of harm to mum, baby or a family member contact emergency services immediately on 999.



What Next

The Parent Rooms (formerly We Are Pangs) offer a range of wellbeing programs, peer support and counselling services.

Together with Relate NI, The Parent Rooms have launched a new perinatal mental health service, for more information or to access this this service visit www.theparentrooms.co.uk/our-services or email hello@theparentrooms.co.uk

Relate NI services continue to be available at this time. If you would benefit from speaking to one of our trained counsellors, contact us at:

028 90323454

office@relateni.org

www.relateni.org

Relate NI Services:

- **Adult Relationship Counselling for Individuals & Couples**
- **Family Counselling**
- **Counselling For Children & Young People**
- **Sex Therapy**

