

NESTS Self-care

Self-care is one way for new parents to improve their mental health. NESTS is a helpful acronym to remember important areas of self-care.

Nutrition

For new parents, it is often difficult to eat well. You may not feel hungry, or you may find that you eat mostly unhealthy foods. Eating nutritious foods regular throughout the day will help you to feel better.

Tips:

- meal plan; do together with your partner or other support person; break into smaller jobs
- keep a water bottle with you to increase fluid intake
- try snacking throughout the day; keep snacks accessible (on counter, beside couch)
- use online grocery shopping

Exercise

When you have just had a baby, exercise may be difficult to fit into your day or you may be so tired you can't imagine trying to find the energy to exercise. However, regular physical activity can reduce stress and boost your mood. Even a small amount can help.

Tips:

- choose an activity that you already enjoy doing
- start small (5-minute solution)
- be realistic and consistent
- exercise with a friend
- find mom and baby exercise classes; bring baby with you

Sleep and Rest

Sleep and rest are very important for both your physical and mental health. However, following the birth of your baby it can be difficult to get the sleep and rest that you need. Most new parents experience difficulties getting enough hours of uninterrupted sleep. Lack of sleep can also have a negative effect on your mood.

Tips:

- ask for help; ask partner or support person to watch baby so you can rest
- give yourself permission to rest during the day
- create bedtime ritual/routine; have "wind down" time before bed
- try to go to bed at a consistent time each night; shift your sleep schedule to earlier in the evening
- value rest; even if you don't fall asleep it is still important to rest

Time for yourself

One of the areas that is most likely to be neglected after you become a new parent is taking time for yourself. For some new parents, learning to take time for themselves can be a difficult habit to develop and can even cause feelings of guilt. However, this is an important part of improving your mood.

Tips:

- try to make time for “down time” or relaxation
- do something uplifting for yourself; look for things that are pleasurable
- start small; use small pockets of time to relax or to do something enjoyable rather than doing chores
- adjust your expectations of yourself; it is unrealistic for you to accomplish everything all the time
- consider dropping non-essential tasks from your to do list (need to get done vs want to get done)
- ask for support from others; accept support when it is offered; hire help if financially able
- take turns with your partner scheduling time off/evenings off

Support

For many new parents, social support plays a very important role in helping to make it through the many life changes that go along with becoming a new parent. Healthy relationships are a protective factor against mental health issues. Types of support can include emotional, practical, group, and informational.

Tips:

- reach out to other new parents that you know
- visit local drop-in centers and playgroups to meet other parents
- use social media to find online support/parenting groups
- be direct and specific with what you need help with; make a list of tasks that you need help with
- try to involve your partner/friends/family to help you

Adapted from: Haring, M., Smith, J., Bodnar, D. et al. (2011). *Coping with depression during pregnancy and following the birth: A cognitive behaviour therapy-based self-management guide for women*. Vancouver: BC Reproductive Mental Health Program.