

## *Postpartum Wellness: Caring for ourselves in response to Covid19*

*By Maggie Muir, LMFT & Genine Leighton LMFT*

If you're feeling anxious or rattled, remind yourself that this is a normal reaction to frightening events. It's natural at this time to feel worried about ourselves and our vulnerable loved ones. Take a deep breath, offer yourself compassion and see below for wellness tips for new parents. To close, we provide information on resources for families in crisis.

### *General Wellness Tips*

#### *1. Care for yourself and your nervous system*

Gentle, deep breathing can do wonders when life gets stressful. The wonderful thing is we always have our breath to use as a resource. Sit in a comfortable position, feel your shoulders relax, breathe in slowly and deeply allowing your belly to rise . . . hold a gentle pause . . . and then exhale slowly and fully. Gentle, deep breaths with a long, slow exhalation calm our nervous system. We can do this anytime, anywhere.

Here is a link to a guided meditation. Sometimes having support in a breathwork practice can be comforting. If you listen to even 2 minutes a day, your nervous system will thank you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSbr6C5rwpQ>

#### *2. Stay connected*

Though our community has been directed to practice *social distancing*, we are actually encouraged to practice *physical distancing*. It is more vital now than ever to stay connected socially with family, friends, neighbors and loved ones through phone calls, texts, email, FaceTime, etc.

#### *3. Stay hydrated and nourish yourself with healthy food*

Sip water throughout the day. Staying hydrated can help to keep anxiety from escalating.

Nourish your body with healthy food. Many mothers notice they lose their appetite when they become stressed/anxious. Keep simple snacks on hand and eat protein to keep blood sugar balanced. This can help prevent anxiety attacks. Simple ideas include: apples and nut butter, crackers and cheese, nuts and dried fruit, hard boiled eggs, etc.

#### 4. *Rest*

Let go of nonessential tasks and rest when your children are napping. Stretch gently, sit and read something relaxing, and allow yourself to doze off. A catnap is helpful for calming the nervous system.

Cuddling your young baby skin-to-skin on your chest is soothing for both parent and baby; the calming hormones released help lessen anxiety and stress hormones. So put your feet up, put on some relaxing music, and enjoy cuddling your little one close as often as you can.

#### 5. *Consider a break from the news*

If staying informed is causing your stress to escalate, consider reading only essential info, possibly from one reputable site such as the World Health Organization. Following social media, reading news online or watching TV news can take its toll on our nervous systems and our wellbeing. If you're getting triggered and yet need to stay abreast of current recommendations, you might consider asking your partner or a support person to keep you updated, or to send you informative, helpful pieces to read, then stopping there. Peruse your bookshelf for a favorite novel or light reading to enjoy in the evening.

#### 6. *Tend your sleep*

Getting to bed early and getting good rest is vital to our health and wellbeing. Consider a warm bath before bed. If you don't have a bathtub, try a warm shower. Pamper yourself a bit and take some slow, deep, relaxing breaths.

Melatonin, the hormone that our bodies release in response to being in the dark, is a potent antioxidant. Dimming the lights in the evening and turning off computer and TV screens helps our bodies to release melatonin and leads to more restorative sleep.

If your baby wakes at night for care and feeding, this is even more reason to get to bed early and sleep in whenever you can. You can ask your partner or support person to take the first morning shift of caring for your baby so you can sleep a bit longer.

Resting and napping during the day can help both children and parents to sleep more restfully in the night.

#### 7. *Step into nature*

Stepping outside and looking up at the sky is good for our spirits. We can problem-solve creative ways to get outside while practicing social distancing.

Consider putting your baby in a front pack for a walk in the woods, or taking your young children to play on a quiet beach. Getting out in fresh air does wonders for our nervous system and wellbeing.

You could pack a picnic dinner and go to the coast to watch the sunset from the comfort of your car.

#### *8. Help children with hygiene*

With toddlers and older children, we can play games to teach them to cough into an elbow, etc. Handwashing is effective for reducing the spread of illness. When we wash hands together we can sing “Happy Birthday” to family pets and fictional characters. This may get your little ones laughing and extend the washing-up time.

A favorite way to help my young children wash well was to fill the bathroom sink with warm water and bubble soap and hide small toys under the bubbles. They would play for long minutes and soak their hands and nails clean.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/english/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus.aspx>

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus>

Following is a blog for parents spending time at home with their children

[familyconnectionsathome.blogspot.com](http://familyconnectionsathome.blogspot.com)

#### *9. Ask for what you need*

It may be helpful to remind ourselves that our partners and family members aren't mind readers. Often in a stressful situation, the most helpful thing we can do is communicate our needs clearly. It may be helpful to say: “I just need a few minutes of listening” or “I'm frightened and just need a hug right now.”

#### *10. Offer kindness in the world*

One thing that lifts our spirits is giving to others. Check in on a neighbor and offer to deliver warm food to their porch if they are quarantined; write a

heartfelt thank you to your healthcare providers working on the front line; donate online to a group helping to feed people or care for those with less. Bringing hope to others is a wonderful way to counter despair.

We can remind ourselves that what's going on is temporary and we are all going through these times of uncertainty together.

Be gentle with yourself and take time to talk to other adults to get support and share your feelings.

Although we can't control the stressful events unfolding in our world, we can do our part to protect our community and we can control how we respond to these events. We can practice self-care and offer ourselves and our loved ones gentleness and loving kindness.

### *For families experiencing crisis:*

Postpartum is a vulnerable time for a mother's nervous system and emotional health. If you are experiencing escalating anxiety, panic or depression or feel concerned about your wellbeing, consider the following resources.

### *Protect your sleep*

This is an especially important time to protect your sleep; You might enlist a family member or support person to assist with care of your baby and especially with night feedings so you can get uninterrupted blocks of sleep. If you are having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, contact your PCP for assistance.

### *Utilize your care team*

Check in with your PCP or psychiatrist. Most offices are developing telehealth services online; this may be an option. Refill any medications you take; it's a good idea to stock up for 60-90 days ahead when possible.

If you have a mental health provider, stay in touch with them. Many are providing phone and/or video appointments at this time.

If you don't have a mental health provider, call your PCP to see if they offer behavioral health care and also call your insurance provider (the number is on your wallet card) to inquire about therapy referrals. You can also ask

about counseling support if your employer has an Employee Assistance Program.

Postpartum Support International has a helpline for families that is very trustworthy and helpful. (They will call back and provide emotional support, guidance and resources.)

[www.postpartum.net](http://www.postpartum.net)

1 (800) 944 4773 avail in English and Spanish

text: (503) 894 9453 English

text: (971) 420 0294 Spanish

PSI also has online support groups and a listing of online counseling providers who specialize in maternal wellness.

If you have concerns about hurting yourself or your baby, this is a medical emergency. Contact your nearest emergency room.

El Camino Hospital in Mountain View has a mother-baby unit with inpatient and outpatient care for mothers in crisis.

<https://www.elcaminohealth.org/services/mental-health/specialty-programs/maternal-outreach-mood-services>

Take very good care of yourself and your family at this time; remember to be gentle with yourself, take deep calming breaths, reach out for support and take some time to sit and reflect on what you need to be well. We will all get through this together.

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