

Postpartum Mental Health Toolkit



About Me



Welcome! I'm so glad you're here. My name is Stephanie. I'm a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and Perinatal Mental Health Clinician (PMH-C) from Chicago, IL. My team and I work with individuals throughout Illinois and Arizona providing mental health services.

There is a huge gap in resources and the care that women receive throughout the perinatal period. Whether you're thinking about having a child, trying to conceive (TTC), pregnant, postpartum, or a parent to grown children, mental health affects you at every. single. stage. The best part about working with women throughout this period is the transformation that occurs when a woman realizes just how amazing she is.

My goal is to help as many women realize that they deserve to be held just as much as their little one.

Stephanie

Founder, Crescent Moon Therapy





WHY YOU'RE HERE

If you're like me, the moment you got pregnant it felt like this expedited timetable for my life. I felt like I needed to get a million things done before baby's arrival and I didn't know where to start. I scoured the internet for checklists and guidance for "how to prepare for baby" none of which truly felt helpful but added to my rumination and anxiety. As a therapist, one of the most important things I knew I needed to prioritize during pregnancy and postpartum was my mental health.

In my research, I couldn't find anything that was working for me. I wanted a concise, "starter guide" on how to prioritize my mental health postpartum and ways to start to prepare during pregnancy. If this sounds like you, I get it and I've been there. If this is not you that's ok too! Being anxious during pregnancy is certainly not a right of passage. However, having tools available should your mood change can be helpful!

I'm here to tell you that nothing is a one size fits all approach when it comes to mental health, but what I've found in my research, clinical training, and hands on experience with clients is that there are definitely some general themes to consider. This guide is certainly not a replacement for individual therapy. It's simply a starting point for you to understand how you can begin to support your mental health. My goal is to arm you with knowledge and clinically-backed information so that you can feel more confident in supporting yourself and your mental health.

Let's get started!

One.

Knowledge and Education

What is perinatal mental health? What do we mean when we say postpartum? I think it's helpful to define some of the key language we use during this period:

1. **Perinatal:** The word "peri" comes from the Latin root meaning "around" and natal meaning "birth." So when we say perinatal we are referring to the entire period from preconception through postpartum.
2. **Postpartum or the 4th Trimester:** The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) defines postpartum as the 12 weeks following the birth of the child. In my opinion, this is wildly inaccurate and does not account for the physical and emotional complexities an individual experiences in the FIRST YEAR following the birth of a child, extending into the rest of one's life. In the perinatal mental health field, we consider postpartum to be forever after the birth of your child.
3. **Baby Blue's:** the emotional change that many new mothers experience. Feelings typically begin within a few days after childbirth and may last up to TWO WEEKS. The Baby Blues are considered a mild and normal adjustment period as the mother's body undergoes hormonal changes and adapts to the new role of being a caregiver. Symptoms may include: mood swings, crying spells, irritability, fatigue, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, and/or feelings of sadness or emptiness.



One.

Knowledge and Education

4. **Postpartum Anxiety (PPA)**: Manifests through excessive worry, fear, and apprehension about the baby's health and well-being or the mother's ability to care for her child. Symptoms of PPA may include:

- i. constant worrying and racing thoughts
- ii. panic attacks
- iii. restlessness or feeling "on edge"
- iv. trouble sleeping even when the baby is sleeping
- v. physical symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, or heart palpitations

5. **Postpartum Depression (PPD)**: Can emerge at any time during the first year after childbirth. Symptoms of PPD may include:

- i. persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- ii. loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- iii. changes in appetite or weight
- iv. difficulty bonding with the baby
- v. extreme fatigue or lack of energy
- vi. feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- vii. thoughts of self-harm or harming the baby

All of this terminology is super helpful to define because it creates a baseline language for us to communicate with ourselves and others. Understanding these definitions also allows us to know when we might need more support! The symptoms outlined above can be shared with our partners, family, friends or anyone in your support system that will support you as you go through this transition.

If you feel like you're starting to exhibit symptoms congruent with **PPA** or **PPD**, consider reaching out to a healthcare professional. Refer to "Resources" on page 13 for how to find a perinatal specific provider in your area.

Remember, the journey into parenthood is unique for each individual, and experiencing some emotional challenges is normal. Understanding the difference between the Baby Blues and postpartum depression/anxiety is crucial for seeking appropriate support and treatment. By taking care of your mental health, you can better care for yourself and your baby.

Two. Sleep



Sleep and mental health are HIGHLY correlated. Without quality sleep, it will be very challenging to manage your mental health. We can largely influence sleep by making sure baby is well fed during the day and supporting baby through any feeding issues they might be having. However, if we are being honest, sleep is extremely challenging in the fourth trimester and can feel like an Olympic sport at times.

I really want to emphasize that YOUR sleep is just as important as baby's. If you are not adequately rested, you will not be able to show up as the parent, partner, friend, etc. you want to. **The rule of thumb to remember when it comes to sleep is: a minimum of 6 hours of sleep within a 24 hr. period, with at least one 4 hour stretch.** This will certainly require some coordinating and help from your support system to ensure all adults caring for baby are adequately prioritizing rest.

Sleep hygiene is an integral part to creating an environment for effective sleep. By creating a “sleepy” bedroom environment and daily routines, you can promote healthy sleep. Here is a non-exhaustive list of things that contribute good sleep hygiene:

- having time to wind down at the end of the day
- limiting screen exposure 1-hour prior to bedtime
- limiting caffeine intake and prioritizing a healthy diet
- consistent bedtime (for you and baby)
- 30 minutes of movement during the day
- spending time outside/exposure to external light
- cool bedroom temperature

Three.

Identifying your Support System

Parenting is really hard. Louder for the people in the back: PARENTING IS REALLY HARD! We were never meant to parent alone and society had not created effective systems for us to feel supported in raising our children like prior generations. In a lot of ways, it can feel like we are set up for failure. I'm here to tell you that there are effective ways to create a reliable and consistent support system, but it does require effort and sometimes a little creativity.

Traditionally, support systems looked like our partners/spouses, extended families, and/or neighborhood support. This isn't realistic for many people anymore. A lot of people live away from their parents so access to grandparents for childcare may not be possible. In many households, both adults are working full-time jobs.

So where does that leave us? What options do we have? I think it's important to highlight not only the logistical importance of support systems (i.e. childcare) but also the emotional impact support systems have on our mental health. We were never meant to parent alone. Parenting was always intended to be a group effort. As you think about your support system, who are the people you intend to utilize during postpartum? Can you see certain friendships and family members wanting to be a part of your postpartum journey? Maybe others not so much?

Here are some general support system opportunities to consider:

- Childcare: family/friend support, nanny, daycare, etc.
- New mom's groups: these are wonderful opportunities to meet new moms in your community, often similar in age to your baby, and relate to many of the common stressors and joys that come with parenting.
- Therapy: your therapist is an integral part of your support system during pregnancy and postpartum.
- Books and Podcasts: these can be wonderful resources for new parents to listen to strategies on how to manage mood and also hear first hand accounts from new parents.
- Social media: there are really wonderful social media accounts, providing evidence-based, factual information about parenting. It can be a really helpful in normalizing many of the experiences of new parents. Give us a follow on Instagram at [@crescentmoon_therapy](https://www.instagram.com/crescentmoon_therapy)

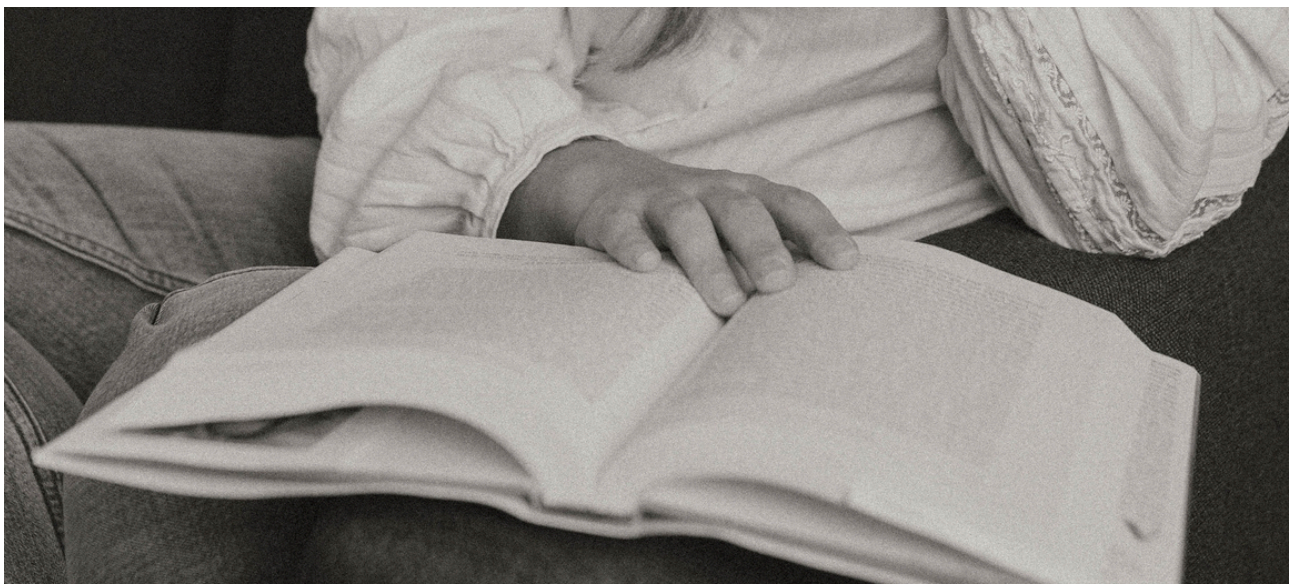
Four.

Having a Good Therapist.

As a therapist, of course I am biased to the benefits of actively pursuing therapy. But hear me out. How many times have you gone to a family member or a friend when you were looking for emotional support and their response just wasn't as helpful as you thought? That's because your family member/friend can't be your therapist. A therapist is a clinically trained professional who provides unbiased support that is empathetic, gentle, and reflective in a way that helps you work towards your identified goals.

Here are some ways in which therapy can be helpful:

- **Emotional support:** whether you're feeling anxious, irritable, depressed, sad, frustrated, angry, or in the thick of grief, therapy provides a safe and supportive space to express and process these emotions to reduce emotional distress.
- **Coping strategies:** this is a big buzz word right now, however, sometimes the coping strategies you learned outside of the perinatal period are no longer helpful. That's ok! Having a perinatal specific therapist who can help teach you new strategies and stress management techniques can be extremely effective in improving your overall well-being.



Four.

Having a Good Therapist.

Here are some ways in which therapy can be helpful (continued):

- **Communication and relationship support:** Parenting inevitably puts a strain on relationships. Therapy can be a helpful platform to improve communication, resolves conflicts, and strengthen partnerships. Learning how to effectively work together as a team throughout parenthood is integral to a functioning household.
- **Reducing isolation:** Early motherhood, and parenting in general, can feel very isolating at times. Therapy offers a nonjudgemental and empathetic environment where new parents can be vulnerable and share their experiences while feeling validated and normalized in their experiences.
- **Exploring identity:** Parenthood is a complete identity shift. It's not about saying goodbye to who you were prior to becoming a parent, but rather exploring who you are now, how your values may or may not have changed, and how you want to choose to intentionally move forward.

Receiving therapeutic care from a provider who understands the unique challenges of those in the thick of the perinatal period is an integral part of growth, healing, and recovery. **While so much is out of your control throughout parenthood, therapy is a choice you do get to make for yourself and your well-being.**

Five.

Accepting Help.

As a recovering perfectionist myself, accepting help when I should be able to “do it all on my own” has been an important life lesson and certainly one that needs to be reinforced throughout parenthood. We were never meant to parent alone, let alone go through life without support. In my work, one of the biggest hurdles I see many new moms face during postpartum is accepting that they cannot do it all. You need to accept the help. Once you can come terms with this, it allows space for self-compassion, acceptance, and a deeper bond with your baby. If you are constantly running on empty trying to do all the things, you won't be able to provide in the way I desperately know you want to.

If you self-identify as someone who struggles to accept help, remember, you're not alone. Here are some reflection questions to consider:

- Why is it so hard for me to accept help?
- Have I set this expectation for myself? Was it modeled in my family of origin?
- What are my partner's expectations around accepting help? Do I feel comfortable bringing this topic up with them?
- If it feels uncomfortable to accept help, what type of help would feel helpful? Hiring someone to help clean the home? Take care of yard work? Maybe accepting childcare doesn't feel right to you but there are other household tasks you can consider outsourcing.

Accepting help doesn't come natural to a lot of people so when parenthood comes around we're asked to engage in this massive mindset shift that maybe we weren't prepared for. Be patient with yourself as you navigate this shift and remember: people want to help you. If they didn't, they wouldn't offer it.



Postpartum Mental Health Toolkit Checklist

- ✓ Knowledge and Education
- ✓ Sleep
- ✓ Identifying your Support System
- ✓ Having a Good Therapist
- ✓ Accepting Help

So what's next?

I encourage you to review the checklist again and identify what areas feel like you'll be able to manage and other areas that feel a bit more challenging.

If you're ready to take the next step and are wanting to try therapy, **reach out to us!** We'd love to support you!

We see clients residing in Illinois and Airzona via telehealth. You can reach out via our website or email us at info@crescentmoon-therapy.com

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The information in this guide should be taken as educational only and is not a replacement for psychotherapy. Utilizing this guide does not constitute a treatment relationship in any way nor does it diagnosis or treat anyone for a mental health condition.

This is not medical advice. Consult with your healthcare provider directly if you have any concerns about your mental health. If you are experiencing any suicidal thoughts, call 911 or report to your nearest emergency room.

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Resources

1 **Identifying a therapist:** here are a few websites to utilize to identify a perinatal specific therapist in your area:

- <https://psidirectory.com/>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com>

2 **Podcasts:** here are some parenting podcasts I love:

- ParentData by Emily Oster
- We Can Do Hard Things with Glennon Doyle and Abby Wambach
- Good Inside by Dr. Becky

3 **Book Recommendations:**

- Any and ALL Emily Oster's books on parenting
- Mom Genes: Inside the New Science of Our Ancient Maternal Instinct by Abigail Tucker
- Good Inside: A Guide to Becoming the Parent You Want to Be by Becky Kennedy

