



# information for women

What is anxiety? 2

Learning about the symptoms of anxiety 2

Normal anxiety and anxiety disorders 4

Why some women develop anxiety during pregnancy  
and following the birth 5

How common are anxiety disorders  
during pregnancy and following the birth? 6

If I have anxiety, why do I feel so depressed? 6

Getting help: treatment options 8



# *information for women*

What is anxiety?

## **LEARNING ABOUT THE SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY**

Anxiety is a normal and natural human experience. It can affect a person's feelings, thoughts, behavior, and physical well-being. Common signs and symptoms of anxiety are listed on the following page.

*Anxiety is a normal human experience that can affect feelings, thoughts, behavior and physical well-being*



<b>Signs and symptoms of anxiety</b>
<b>Feelings</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• feeling fearful, scared or upset</li><li>• feeling irritable</li><li>• feeling keyed up or on edge</li></ul>
<b>Upsetting thoughts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• re-occurring thoughts or images of harm to the baby</li><li>• unrealistic or excessive worry about the baby</li><li>• worry about being a good or competent parent</li><li>• worry about other topics (finances, getting things done, relationships)</li></ul>
<b>Behaviours</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “overdoing” activities like washing or cleaning excessively.</li><li>• excessively checking, seeking reassurance or doing online ‘research’ about health problems</li><li>• avoiding people, places or activities</li></ul>
<b>Physical symptoms</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• trembling, twitching or feeling shaky</li><li>• restlessness</li><li>• becoming easily tired</li><li>• difficulty concentrating or mind going blank</li><li>• trouble falling or staying asleep</li><li>• gas, constipation or diarrhea</li><li>• being easily startled</li><li>• shortness of breath or smothering sensations</li><li>• racing and/or pounding heart</li><li>• sweating or cold clammy hands</li><li>• dizziness or lightheadedness</li></ul>

*Approximately 1 in 4 people will experience significant problems with anxiety at some point in their lives.*



It is important to remember that all of us experience anxiety from time to time, most typically when we are feeling threatened. Some experiences will trigger anxiety in most of us. For example, most people will respond with anxiety or fear while walking alone through the city at night, or when speaking in front of a large crowd. In our daily lives, the things that make us feel anxious vary from person to person. At low levels, anxiety can be helpful for us — it can motivate us to get working on tasks, it can increase our ability to focus, make us more alert and can help us to avoid dangerous situations. However, when anxiety becomes intense, lasts for a long time or interferes with our lives, it is important to seek help.

## **NORMAL ANXIETY AND ANXIETY DISORDERS**

While everyone experiences anxiety at some point in their life, individuals with an anxiety disorder experience excessive symptoms of anxiety on a regular basis for a prolonged period of time (months and years, not just for a few days or weeks). It is possible that a person may have an anxiety disorder if symptoms of anxiety have:

- been excessive and difficult to control for an extended period of time
- led to significant emotional distress and personal suffering
- led to significant interference in work, school, home or social activities.

Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health problem.

**Approximately 1 in 10 people currently have an anxiety disorder.**

Anxiety disorders are more common in women. About 30% of women will experience an anxiety disorder at some time in their life, compared with approximately 19% of men.

People from all walks of life are affected by anxiety disorders, including some of the most talented, intelligent, loveable and kind people you could hope to meet.

Only a health professional can diagnose an anxiety disorder. If you think that your anxiety symptoms may be part of an anxiety disorder, it is important that you talk to a health professional about your symptoms.

You may want to complete the Self-Test for Anxiety Symptoms During Pregnancy and Following the Birth in Module 6, page 2, and take this information with you when you go to see your health professional. You may also want to see the section entitled “Tips for talking to a healthcare professional about your symptoms” in Module 6, page 18.

*Some of the challenges and changes during pregnancy and following the birth can make anxiety more likely*



## **WHY SOME WOMEN DEVELOP ANXIETY DURING PREGNANCY AND FOLLOWING THE BIRTH**

Many women are surprised and disappointed when they find themselves feeling anxious during pregnancy or following the birth. After all, most people expect that this will be a joyous time — and for some women it truly is. But there are also a lot of other challenges and changes going on during this period that can make anxiety more likely during this time than at other times in a woman's life.

For some women, this is the first time they have ever experienced anxiety. Other women who have had problems with mood or anxiety in the past may find that their symptoms return or worsen during pregnancy or after the birth.

The risk of anxiety during pregnancy and following the birth is greater if the woman has a prior history of anxiety or depression or is also experiencing other stressors, such as:

- recent stressful life events (e.g., death of a parent, moving, changing jobs)
- relationship problems
- unrealistic expectations of motherhood by the woman or others around her
- lack of social support
- infant health problems

Some women who have previously taken medications for depression or anxiety may choose to stop taking their medications prior to or during pregnancy. In some cases, this may lead to an increase in anxiety symptoms during pregnancy and the postpartum.

# *Expectant and new mothers experiencing anxiety are not weak, crazy or bad*

## module 2



### **HOW COMMON ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS DURING PREGNANCY AND FOLLOWING THE BIRTH?**

At this point, not enough research has been done for us to be able to accurately estimate how many women are affected by diagnosable anxiety disorders during pregnancy and following the birth.

However, we do know that expectant and new mothers who experience anxiety are not weak, crazy or bad. Anxiety is not a reflection of mothering skills and women with anxiety cannot just “snap out of it”. However, with appropriate help, the vast majority of women with anxiety during pregnancy and following the birth are able to overcome their difficulties and enjoy their lives and their babies.

### **IF I HAVE ANXIETY, WHY DO I FEEL SO DEPRESSED?**

Anxiety during pregnancy and following the birth is also often associated with other types of problems. For example, moderate to severe anxiety during this time period is often accompanied by depression. Part of the reason for this may be that it is depressing to be anxious all the time. The symptoms of depression overlap to some extent with the symptoms of anxiety. Common symptoms of depression are listed in the table on the following page.

If you think that you may also be experiencing symptoms of depression, it is important to talk to your health care professional. You may wish to fill out the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) in Module 6, page 7 and show it to your health care professional.

The BC Reproductive Mental Health Program has also written a self-management guide for depression, called “Coping with Depression during Pregnancy and Following the Birth: A CBT-Based Self-Management Guide for Women” that you may find helpful if depression is your main problem. (<http://www.bcmhas.ca/ProgramsServices/ChildYouthMentalHealth/ProgramsServices/Reproductive+Mental+Health/Publications/default.htm>). Many of the skills taught in this guide will also be helpful.

#### **A note regarding self-medication**

Some women suffering from moderate to severe anxiety may try to self-medicate their anxiety symptoms by using alcohol or drugs. This can be harmful to both the mother and the baby. (see Module 4, page 33, ‘A note about drugs and alcohol’)



<b>Signs and symptoms of depression</b>	
<b>Feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feeling depressed or extremely sad or empty most of the day nearly everyday</li> <li>• feeling irritable or angry</li> <li>• feeling very guilty or worthless</li> <li>• feeling hopeless</li> <li>• feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>• not enjoying the baby</li> <li>• not interested in or able to enjoy activities that you used to enjoy</li> </ul>
<b>Thoughts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having thoughts that you are a 'bad' or 'terrible' mother</li> <li>• Thinking that things will never get better</li> <li>• Having frightening thoughts including harming yourself and/or the baby</li> </ul>
<b>Behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sleeping too much or too little</li> <li>• eating too much or too little</li> <li>• withdrawing from family &amp; friends</li> <li>• "snapping" at people</li> <li>• Crying easily</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Symptoms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feeling restless</li> <li>• having little energy</li> <li>• having difficulty concentrating or making decisions</li> <li>• having physical symptoms like headaches or upset stomach</li> </ul>

*With the right help, women with anxiety can overcome their difficulties and enjoy life and their babies*



## **GETTING HELP: TREATMENT OPTIONS**

### **Why some women don't seek help**

Getting help is very important. Unfortunately, many women who are dealing with anxiety during pregnancy and following the birth do not seek treatment. Some women find it difficult to confide in their health care provider about their feelings. They may fear that they will be labeled or not taken seriously. Some women may feel ashamed about “not being happy like I’m supposed to be”. Some women have scary thoughts about harming the baby or find that their anxiety prevents them from attending appointments. Any of these can make it difficult for a woman to get the help she needs.

**It takes courage to begin this process and we congratulate you for taking the first step and reading this guide.**

### **Is there help? Yes!**

There are several approaches that have been shown to help women with anxiety. With appropriate care, most women can decrease their symptoms and start to enjoy pregnancy and the months following the birth.

### **What are the treatment options for anxiety?**

There are several approaches that can be effective. These approaches include:

- **SUPPORTED SELF-HELP** Supported self-help involves regular appointments with a health-care professional who provides support and structure when using print or online resources, such as this self-management guide.
- **COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY** CBT is a form of psychological treatment that has been shown by research studies to be extremely effective for the treatment of anxiety disorders. One of the strengths of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is that it focuses on building skills to help people take an active role in reducing their anxiety symptoms. This can help to prevent future episodes of anxiety. This type of therapy involves regular appointments with a health care professional who provides psychological treatment for anxiety. Treatment may be provided individually or in a group setting.

The skills taught in this guide are based on the principles of CBT.

*Speak to your healthcare provider  
about different treatment options to  
find the right one for you*

module 2



● **MEDICATIONS** Medications treat the symptoms of anxiety at a chemical level in the brain. Medications can help to decrease your anxiety to a more manageable level, so you are able to focus on using CBT skills to make lasting changes to thinking patterns and behaviours that are causing and worsening your anxiety. For the treatment of anxiety during pregnancy and following the birth, medications are best used in combination with self-care and other CBT skills.

Several medications have been shown to significantly lower symptoms for some people suffering from anxiety. To learn more about medications, see Module 6 page 15.

### **How do I choose? Which type of treatment is best for me?**

The decision about which type of treatment is best for a specific woman depends upon a number of things, including the seriousness of symptoms, how you feel about different treatment options and the availability of these different treatment options within your community. Some treatments, such as specialized therapies like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy may not be available in all communities. One of the goals of this guide is to make a CBT approach more accessible in rural and remote communities. Some women, with help from a health professional, will choose to use both psychological treatment and medication to manage their anxiety.

It is a good idea to speak to your health care provider to find out more about the different treatment options that are available to you. It can be helpful too to discuss what you learn with supportive loved ones who can help you to think through the advantages and disadvantages of each option and how these would fit your life. Untreated anxiety can have negative effects on both the mother and her baby. Remember that the goal of treatment is to reduce your symptoms and increase your overall wellbeing so that you can do the things that are important to you.

Different women will take different paths to feeling better and in the end any decision about treatment is a personal one.



**ARE YOU EXPERIENCING THOUGHTS ABOUT HARMING YOURSELF OR SOMEONE ELSE?** Sometimes when women are feeling very anxious and/or depressed and hopeless, they have thoughts about harming themselves or others. If this is happening to you, it is very important that you tell someone you trust about these thoughts and make an urgent appointment to see your family physician to discuss these thoughts. If you are worried that you may be unsafe, please call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room