

UNDERSTANDING INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?

Infant mental health is about how babies feel, express emotions, form close relationships, and explore the world around them. When babies feel safe, loved, and cared for, they thrive - emotionally, socially, and physically.

WHY IT MATTERS?

Good mental health in the early years sets the foundation for:

- ➡ Strong relationships with family and friends
- ➡ Healthy emotional regulation
- ➡ Confidence to explore and learn
- ➡ Better outcomes later in life

WHAT DOES POSITIVE INFANT MENTAL HEALTH LOOK LIKE?

A baby who is doing well emotionally might:

- ➡ Feel calm and comforted when held
- ➡ Show curiosity about people and surroundings.
- ➡ Enjoy playing or being talked to
- ➡ Use sounds or gestures to get attention.
- ➡ Settle easily after being upset

SIGNS YOUR BABY MIGHT BE STRUGGLING

It's not always easy to know when a baby is having a hard time. Look for consistent patterns like:

- ➡ Sleeping - Kids have ongoing trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, sleeping for very short periods or much longer than usual.
- ➡ Feeding - Refusing to eat or overfeeding, showing discomfort during feeds (reflux, crying, distress).



- ➡ Emotions and behaviour - Difficult to comfort or calm down; appears withdrawn, avoids eye contact or touch; less playful or rarely smiles; frequently fussy, irritable, or crying for long periods; doesn't make sounds (cooing, babbling) or shows little expression.
- ➡ Response to the environment: over-reacts to noises, lights or touch (startles easily); seems numb, quiet, or disconnected.

WHAT AFFECTS A BABY'S MENTAL HEALTH?

- ➡ Parental stress, anxiety, or depression
- ➡ Premature birth or ongoing illness
- ➡ Family conflict or loss
- ➡ Changes in caregiving or housing
- ➡ Lack of consistent emotional connection

HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT YOUR BABY'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

- ➡ Respond to your baby's cues - hold, cuddle, smile, and talk to them often.
- ➡ Comfort them when they cry; this builds trust and emotional security.
- ➡ Consistent feeding, sleeping, and play routines help babies feel safe.
- ➡ Sing songs, read books, and play simple games like peek-a-boo.
- ➡ Encourage curiosity and celebrate small milestones.
- ➡ Your wellbeing affects your baby's.
- ➡ Take breaks, ask for help, and connect with others - a supported parent helps a baby thrive.



WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

- ➡ Sometimes, extra support can make all the difference.
- ➡ Talk to a GP, maternal and child health nurse, or early childhood educator if:
 - ✓ Your baby often seems distressed or disconnected
 - ✓ You're worried about their sleep, feeding, or emotions
 - ✓ You feel unsure about how to support them emotionally
- ➡ If there is an emergency or immediate risk of harm, call 000

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