



Mums' mental health and wellbeing

About this project

This report brings together some Scottish women's experiences of being a mum, and the effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

Outside the Box heard from women who were looking for a different type of support around their mental health and wellbeing. Some had been given a diagnosis of postnatal depression recently or when they had a baby some years ago. Others did not think of themselves as having a mental health problem - but they did find that life was stressful and sometimes quite difficult.

There were aspects of support for women and their children that the mums we met found very helpful. Some came from the health services, while others were the things that families and friends did, or the peer support they got from other mums. They thought it would be a good idea if more women could get access to these sorts of supports.

The women also had experience of things that were less helpful and suggestions on how support to them could be improved.

This is how we gathered the information.

- We talked to some mums who came up with the initial idea for the project.
- We held a few sessions when women living in a local area could come along and talk about their experiences and give their suggestions.
- We looked at the conversations women were having on online parenting forums. We have not used any of their comments directly because we did not have their permission to do so, but we found that many of the themes which were discussed by the women at our sessions were repeated on them.
- We looked at the research evidence and good practice on care and support for women who have post natal depression and other mental health problems.
- We also drew on the wider context of research and good practice around Recovery and raising awareness about mental wellbeing as part of the programme linked to the implementation of Towards a Mentally Flourishing Scotland.

Although we only spoke to a small number of mums, their stories had many common themes. We have grouped those themes together in this paper. We think that their experiences and advice has a lot in common with the experiences that other new mums go through.

The women who took part in this project come from several local authority areas: Dundee, Glasgow, Falkirk and East Renfrewshire. Overall, 21 women contributed to the project, along with 5 workers such as Health Visitors, Community Psychiatric Nurses and workers at a local Families' project.

This project is part of Working Towards, which supports people from community groups across Scotland to develop new user-led services. Working Towards is part-funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

This project also received a grant from the Scottish Community Foundation Women's Programme.

How many women have poor mental health and wellbeing?

This is what the official estimates of the frequency of mental health problems have identified.

- Up to 50% of new mums have 'postnatal blues' - a normal emotional change that occurs a few days after childbirth that is thought to be linked to rapid changes in hormones.
- 13%-15% of women experience postnatal depression. It can begin up to a year after the birth and is just like depression experienced at any other time.
- 0.1% of women develop puerperal psychosis, which is a serious mental illness.

Some of the women we spoke to were surprised at these estimates: they felt that they should be much higher, particularly around postnatal depression.

Some mental health problems, including depression, are more common among people in certain situations:

- Living in poverty or having money worries.
- People who have few close friends.
- People who don't have a role where they make a meaningful contribution.
- People who are experiencing or have been affected by violence or abuse or are affected by discrimination.
- People who have physical health problems or disabilities.

Some mums we met described their experience of baby blues and some talked about their experiences of being depressed after they had their baby. All of the women described other aspects of not-so-good mental health, especially the stress of looking after a baby or several small children.

Everyone we spoke to described how hard it is being a mum, and thought that having times when your mental health and wellbeing were not so good was something that every mum experienced.



“Being a mum is stressful.”

“You need to remember the good times too. The other day I was walking back through the park with the wee one in the pram and the older one was in a good mood and just chattering away, and I thought ‘This is great. I am so lucky’.”

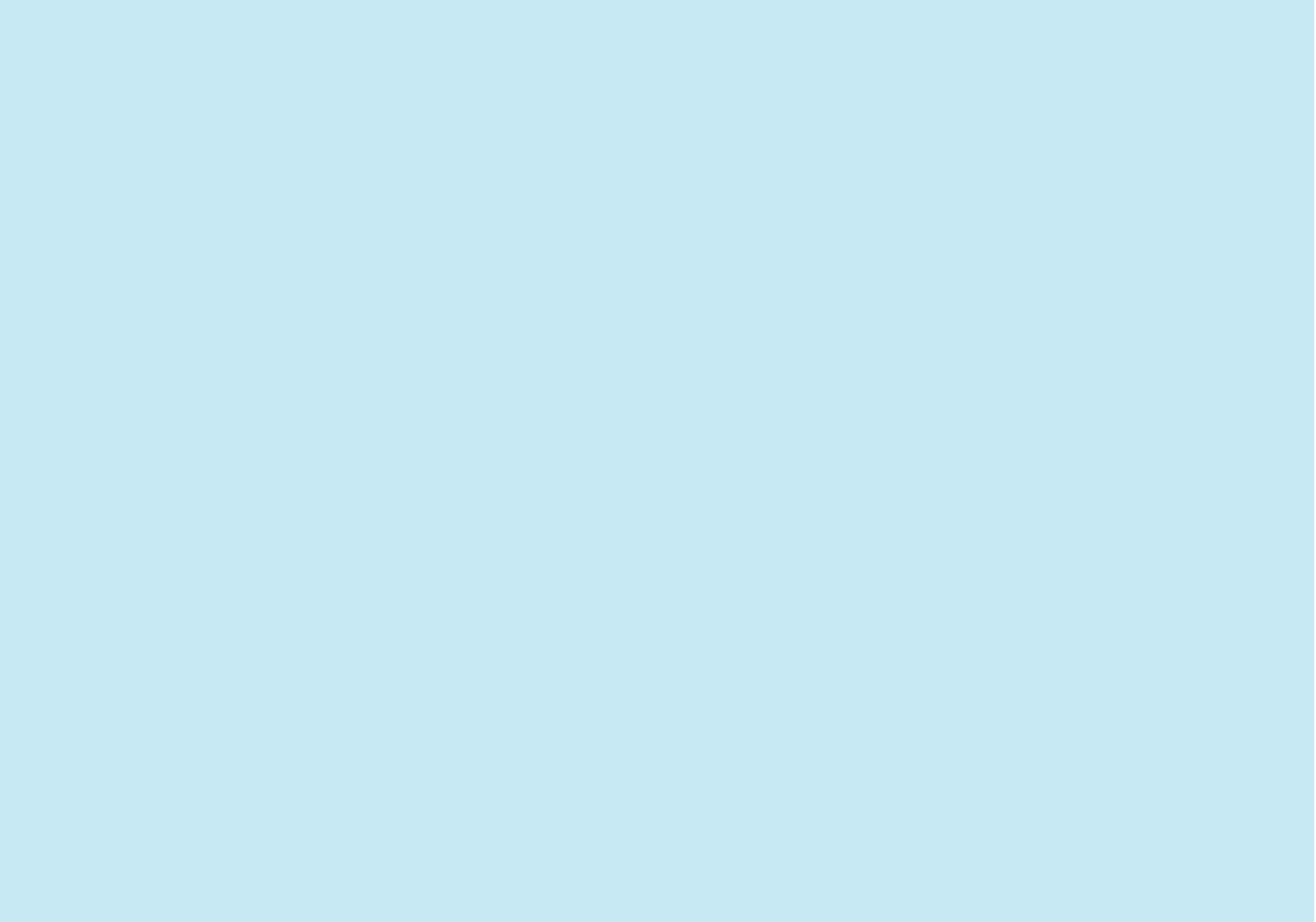
“I had depression after my first baby.”

“I was ready for the baby blues. That’s normal, it can happen to anyone. You know it’s probably coming and it will pass. What I wasn’t expecting was to be struggling a few months after that. When the Health Visitor talked to me about depression, I didn’t think it was that. But I’m certainly not feeling on top of the world.”

“I find it is useful when people talk about ‘mental health and wellbeing’. I hadn’t heard it put that way before. I like that. How it feels just now, it’s as if I’m not fit mentally but I’m not unwell, just as I’m not very fit physically either but I’m not ill. I know I have to get fit again physically after the baby. The idea that maybe I need to get mentally fit as well makes sense to me.”

“It can be really hard to look after yourself – physically or mentally.”





What it feels like

The mums who we spoke to said that they did not necessarily feel the way which they expected to after they had their babies. Everything had changed, and not always in the way which they had thought that it would.

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“There is just so much to think about and you can feel overwhelmed by it.”

“I really missed having adult conversation.”

“It probably is easier when it’s your second baby. You’re not as worried. I was more relaxed, more laid back.”

“Even when you’ve planned for the baby and think you are all ready for it, everything changes. You have to change all your priorities.”

“The high expectations come partly from yourself and partly from other people.”

“There are so many people giving you advice. Everything is coming at you all at once.”

“You’ve been the centre of attention while you are pregnant – sometimes too much attention. And then everything is focussed on this baby. It can feel strange.”

“I felt I had to get it right straight away. But it took a while to work out what was right for my baby.”

“Going from being a working couple, who shared everything around the house, to being at home taking most of the responsibility for washing clothes, cleaning and so on was hard.”

“There is just no time or space for you. There are days when I can’t even get a shower, not even 5 minutes on my own.”

“You’re responsible for everything but it feels as if you have no control over anything. You plan what you’re going to do each day and none of it happens that way.”

“You don’t want to admit you are not coping, especially as a first time mum. You are looked on as if you don’t know anything. I had looked after kids for 10 or 15 years before I had my own and knew everything about how to look after them.”

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What helps and what doesn't

Peer support from other mums

After such a major life change, many mums felt it was vital that they had support from other people who had been through similar things in order to get better themselves.



“Talking to other mums helps a lot. That way you know other people are going through it the same as you. It isn't just you that feels this way.”

“None of my friends had a baby and I didn't have people to talk to who knew what it was like. It helped a lot when I met other mums.”

“I was the first in our group of friends to have kids. My life changed completely - you feel you are missing out on things. You can't go to the pub with your friends or out for the night with the baby in tow. It's good to get to know other women who know where you are coming from.”

“It takes courage to talk. You need a place to be able to break down, let it out and know it doesn't go any further. If your mask is good, and you are hiding how you feel well, how do you get found?”

“Once you speak about things, it makes a big difference. You often don't realise how bad you are until then.”

“It's like being down in the basement and you don't know how to climb out. I benefitted from practical points from others in the group.”



Health Visitors and GPs

All of the mums felt that their health visitor and their GP had an important part to play in taking care of them.



“It helps when it is easy to contact the Health Visitor to ask something, and you don’t have to make an appointment, make a big thing of it.”

“It helps when the Health Visitor knows you, knows your baby and your family.”

It isn’t the same when it is a Health Visitor you don’t trust.”

“Having a Health Visitor who listens helps a lot.”

“I had depression after my first baby. At that time I was just given pills. This time I had a different GP and Health Visitor. My GP talked about looking after my mental health right from the start of my pregnancy - not anything big and heavy, just recognising it. And that helped in itself. The Health Visitor met me and suggested things that could help even before the baby was born. In the end I was fine – feeling down but not as bad as last time and lots of help. No pills this time, just having space to talk about things and learning about things I could do to help myself.”

“My Health Visitor suggested a really good website. It has suggestions on things I can do myself. And just taking the time to sit and read it is good.”

“I really appreciated it when the GP was interested in how I was, not just how the baby was.”

“The biggest problem I have is getting to see a GP. The system they have at our practice for getting an appointment is so difficult when you have small children and can’t phone in at a very precise time. And if you are 2 minutes late the receptionist makes you feel like the worst person on earth.”

“I always felt like the midwives and GPs were rushing you. They don’t treat you like a human being, just a statistic. Its all different now – I grew up with one doctor who knew your whole family and background. The doctor now may not know anything about your past or your life. You need to try to always go to the same doctor who knows your history and then you don’t have to keep dragging things up with new people.”

“I had mental health problems before, so everyone was all ready to monitor how I was doing and look for problems starting. But they seemed to forget about all the other stuff that helps a new mum. It was only when they decided that I didn’t need extra care and I moved over to the ordinary Health Visitors that I heard about the local mums’ groups and things like that. Looking back, I needed both types of support.”



Getting a break



“It helps when you have people who can help you get a short break, even a few hours every now and then. I’ve got my mum nearby - having someone like that helps.”

“It’s nice to have a few hours. You can get to the shops, get into a changing room without having to try to take the baby and the buggy in with you.”

“It would good to be able to have a hot cup of coffee once in a while.”

“I can have a shower and enjoy it, not rush and have to be out in 2 minutes.”

“You can meet your pal and have a cup of coffee and listen to what each other has to say.”

“I was referred for a childcare place by my health visitor because I am really struggling with my son and he is too young for a funded nursery school place yet, but he didn’t get in, because there are so many other people that were deemed in more need than me.”



Community projects



“The buggy walks are great. You get out for fresh air and get to meet other mums in an ordinary environment.”

“This church project is great. It’s a chance to meet other mums, have some space when the children are at the crèche. And it doesn’t cost us anything, which makes a big difference when money is tight and everything for the baby is so expensive.”

“My Health Visitor told me about the baby massage. It’s been wonderful for both of us. I think that has done more for my mental health than anything else.”

“I was part of a group of 17 mums who did a STEPS course and 16 of us in the room had post natal depression. The support group was a lifeline to me - I got to know people, opened up and we all realised we were not alone.”

“I lived elsewhere when I had my baby and went to a post natal depression group they ran. It was fantastic, I would never had survived without it. The group changed me - I went on to learn to drive and do other things I never thought that I would. That group doesn’t run any more, which is great shame, it really helped me.”



Work - giving up and going back



“Having to give up work was a big factor – we lost a big chunk of money.”

“For me, going back to work was good.”

“Getting back to work gives you your identity back. It feels like going back to normality.”

“It can depend on whether you enjoy your work, and whether you’ve got the right child care arrangements. When these are all good, getting back to work is positive.”

“I work flexitime, so I can work around the times I need to get the children ready for school and the childminder.”

“Looking back, my mental health problems started when I stopped work. I hadn’t realised that all my friends were women I knew through work or friends from way back who I met in town after work. Suddenly, I’d gone from being someone who had a good social life and wore nice clothes and looked good to being someone who looked and felt different and had no-one to talk to apart from my husband who didn’t understand how I was feeling because I couldn’t explain it to him. After the baby was born it was even worse. I went back to work part-time when my daughter was 6 months old. Everyone said that I should wait until my mental health problems got better. But getting back to work was the best thing for me.”



Situations when mums are under additional pressure

As well as the stresses and hormonal changes which come with having a baby, sometime there are other situations which can add even more pressure to a mum. Some of the mums we spoke to commented on their experience of these additional pressures.

When the baby or mum has been unwell

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“They tell you to talk to the other mums at the neonatal unit. But you don’t have the same contact with other mums there as you do in another setting. You ask each other how you are getting on, but it is superficial. There is too much happening for each of you, it is all too personal.”

“We were struggling with feeding. I was up every few hours, day and night. And you couldn’t rush him. The Health Visitor kept asking if I was sleeping ok and was tired, as this could be signs of depression. I won’t tell you what I nearly said to her.”

“I was really unwell. It was an emergency caesarean with blood transfusions. I don’t think I realised how long it would take me to get over that. Looking back, the depression was all mixed in with feeling rotten physically and feeling I had let myself and everyone else down. No-one helped me with the emotional side of that.”

“I didn’t realised I was pregnant ‘till I was 13 weeks - I have ill health and I had had operations, scans, test, x-rays. I couldn’t move after I had the baby. I had to have a C-section and had a really bad time. I needed my partner and my sister to do everything. It was horrendous and I was worried all the time. I couldn’t do things I used to, and I was stuck upstairs for 8 months. My friends all came round, my mum, dad and sister came round, and that got me through. My son was born in July and it was the following May before depression was diagnosed.”

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Other problems for the woman and her family

Many of the women whom we spoke to had other things which were happening in their life that made being a parent harder for them. They wanted people to realise this and not blame them having a baby or their hormones for the way they were feeling all of the time.



“The biggest worry for me at the moment is money. My partner got made redundant while I was pregnant. It’s over a year later and he’s still not working. We’re managing fine with the children. It’s supporting each other through all the job applications that lead to nothing that’s the hard bit. I think both of us are struggling in terms of our mental health and wellbeing.”

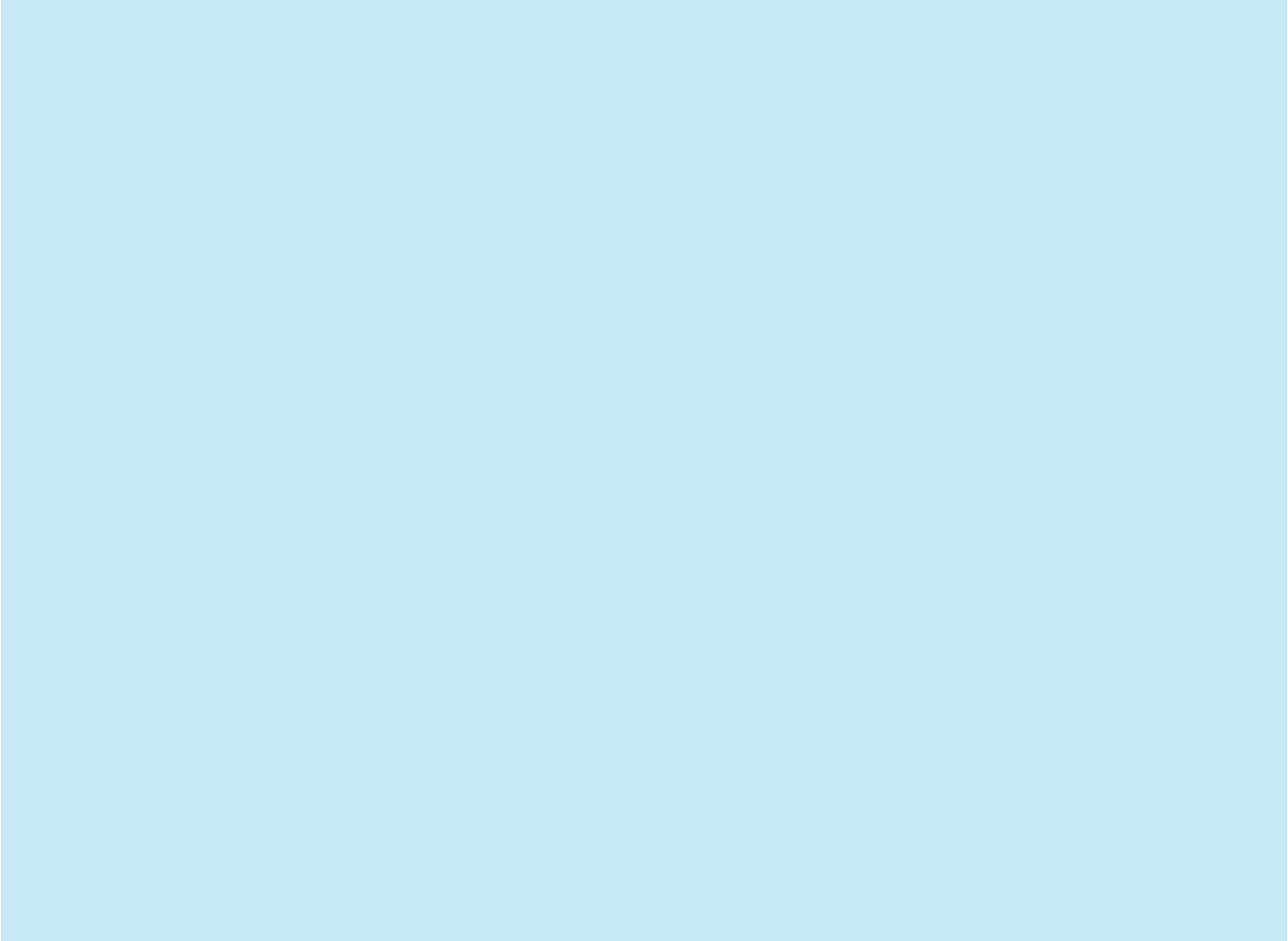
“Money is so tight. That’s the huge worry, what stresses me the most. It feels like there is never enough. The cost of shoes for the children, all the extra bits like the baby wipes – it adds up to so much. What would help me is some advice on budgeting, and whether there are any benefits or grants that I could be getting that I don’t know about.”

“We live in a multi storey. When the lift isn’t working I have to carry everything up 7 flights - the buggy, a toddler, shopping. What would help my mental health most is finally getting a house, or even a flat that was only a few stairs up.”

“I was 16 when I fell pregnant the first time. I had to deal with all the stigma that came with that. I was looked at as if I was a child and I was told that I didn’t need things that I did need. The nurses were horrible to me. One night in the hospital, they took the baby away while I was asleep and didn’t tell me. When I woke up I panicked that someone had stolen her. I barely slept after that. I felt that people were always judging me and deciding I was a bad mother because I was so young.”

“It’s 10 times harder being a parent on your own. You are on duty constantly.”







Tips and hints - what we would tell people

Our tips and hints for other mums

Be kind to yourself!

- Don't put yourself under pressure. Relax. Things will be Ok if something doesn't get done.
- Things are not going to be perfect. Some things will not go to plan, that's normal.
- Don't feel guilty – about anything.
- Don't be ashamed of struggling. Don't be afraid to let people help.
- Your house doesn't need to be perfect. Stuff that!
- Trust your own judgement.

Remember that you matter too.

- Get some time for yourself every day. Even if it is just 10 minutes at some point in the day. It's OK to think, 'This is what I want to do', rather than 'This is what I need to do.'
- Sometimes you need a break. Every living being is entitled to their own space for their wellbeing, even if you have children.

What works for one mum might not work for another.

- You are not a failure if you try to breast feed and it doesn't work for you and your baby, or you feel that bottle feeding will work better for you.
- The advice books are just advice, not rules you must follow or a prediction for what is going to happen.
- There's no instruction manual that comes with them. We just do the best we can.
- If it works for you - what's the problem? Why add more stress trying to do the "right" thing?

Other people have been there too!

- Remember that most people will understand that if you have a young baby, or a couple of small children, you are going to be late sometimes and things will get missed.
- Be willing to ask for help.
- Don't let other people put you under pressure.

A support network is important.

- Have someone you can speak to if you want to talk things over, or have a bit of a moan.



- If you are feeling low or down, talk to someone. If you are too insecure to talk face to face, find somewhere on line to let it out.
- Spend time with other mums. That way you'll know that it isn't just you who finds it hard sometimes. And you'll help each other.
- Check out websites like Moodjuice and others that help you have good mental health.

There are practical ways you can make things easier to do.

- Try to be as organised as you can. For example, if you can leave out your clothes and the children's clothes for next morning, that's one thing you don't need to think about next day.
- Have a structure so you all know what is happening. There will still be things that go wrong, but it is easier to be flexible if the basics are all covered.
- Have it easy for tea time. For weekdays have something that goes into the microwave.
- Get out into the fresh air. Get some exercise. You'll feel much better for it.
- Look at your options around work - when you start and finish, other arrangements. Talk to your boss and colleagues, use whatever flexibility is in the arrangements to avoid unnecessary stress and make it work for you.
- Stick to seeing the one doctor if you can.

Remember what's really important

- There's a lot of pressure material wise to have things for your baby. People get into debt to give their children what they think is the best for them, but it's not, it's just extra pressure that you don't need.
- Don't spoil them from day one. It's hard to undo.
- How do you start saying no when you have always said yes?

Our tips and hints for partners and families

For dads

- Don't put off the time when you do things on your own with the baby or toddler, like saying you'll take him to the park when he's older. Get into the pattern of doing it now.
- Try not to leave so much to the mum, or defer to her. Take the initiative some times.
- Help your partner to have some time to herself. And that probably does mean you'll have to give up some of the time you spend on things that are important to you.
- Remember that your life isn't the same as before you had children either. You have to adjust your priorities and expectations too.



- Try to understand why we do housework and stuff like that in the evenings - it is so much easier when the children are asleep. Telling us to sit down and relax because it's distracting you, or making you feel guilty, isn't really helping. If you want to help, share some of the tasks with us so we get finished and can both sit down.
- Try not to say 'what have you been doing all day?' when you come home and the place is a mess. And try not to think it and have it show on your face even if you don't say the words.
- Early on, when the hormones are still odd, remember that there are days when we are not very rational.

For families

- It is great to give advice - encourage a new mum and share your experience. But you also need to know when to back off, especially when she has found something that works for her and for this baby.
- Remember that ideas change, and you might not be remembering how it really was for you.
- Find the balance between respecting how these parents want to do things and offering your experience and advice.
- Remember that different things work for different children, just as they do for different people. Babies and young children develop at their own pace and times.

Tips for Health Visitors, GPs etc

- Give advice in ways that support mums and builds up our confidence.
- Recognise that it takes time for each mum to get to know you.
- Also recognise that sometimes a mum and Health Visitor just don't gel. It can help if we know that we can speak to other Health Visitors at the baby clinics.
- Tell us about resources that can help our mental health and wellbeing and help us to help ourselves - good websites and books.
- It helps a lot when GPs are approachable. Show that you are interested in how we are doing as well as in the baby.
- Encourage mums to get involved in groups with other mums, especially if we are struggling a bit at the beginning.
- Help us find services that benefit us and our children which are free or low cost for us.
- Don't assume that if we are having a difficult time it is all down to our hormones. Remember that mums sometimes need information and advice on matters such as money or housing. Point us to places where we can get the right advice on the other things that affect our and our families' health and wellbeing.



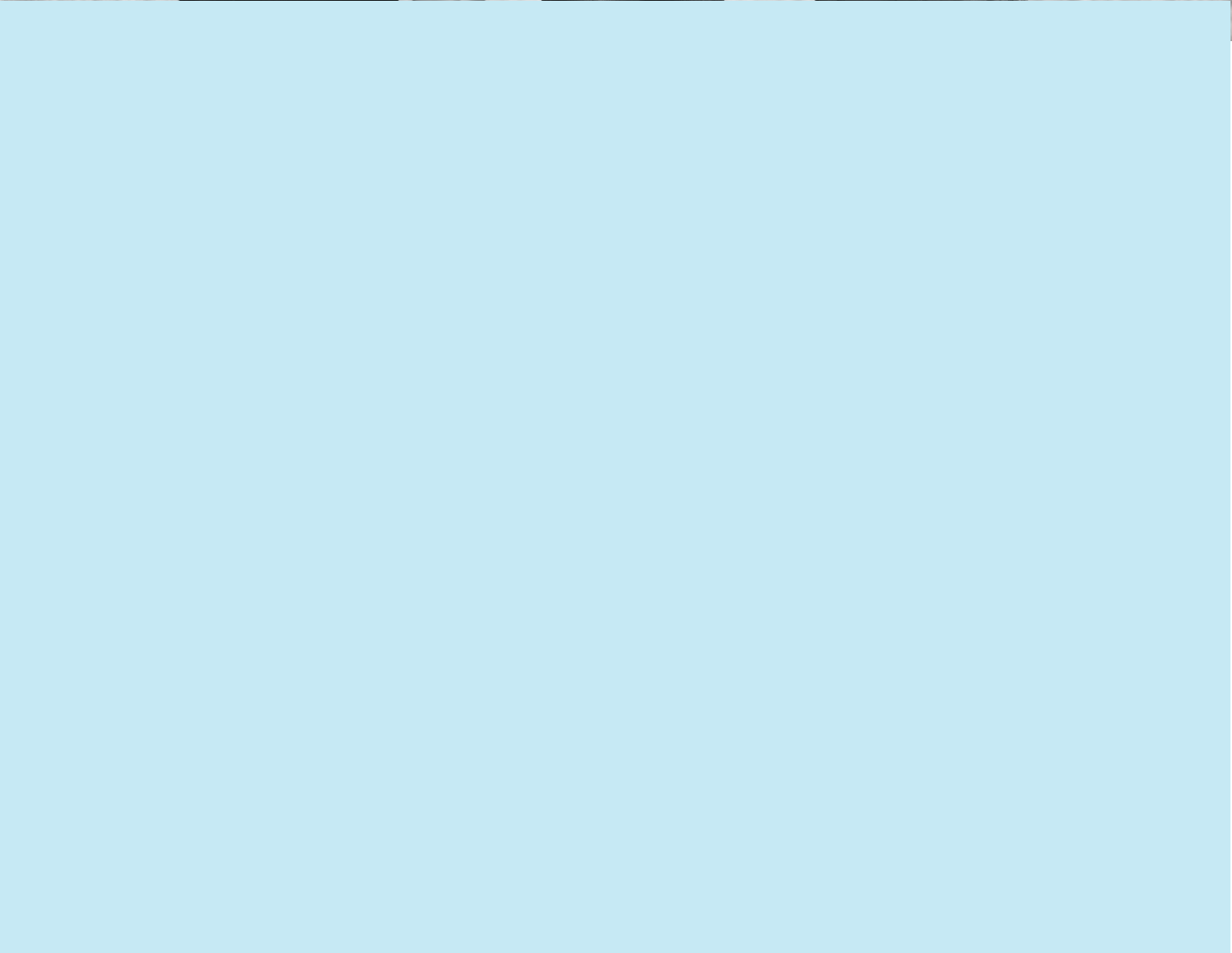
- There are things that can help us look after our own mental health and wellbeing. Do more of this preventative support and respond in ways that build our wellbeing.

Wider services

- Keep providing services that help us, such as buggy walks and baby massage. These should be available to everyone, not just in a few places.
- If resources are tight, come and talk to mums about other ways to keep these services going – such as mums helping to run them and getting involved as volunteers.
- A message for the Government and the NHS as a whole is to ask parents what they find useful and then act on what we tell you.
- Think about the whole range of women who have mental, health problems around the time they have their baby and over the next year or so.
- More support and help with childcare would be good. **And finally – one last comment to help you through the rough times:**
- Don't give up. It does get better. It might not feel like it does, but it does. It is difficult, but it's not impossible.

Places where you can get help and support if you are not feeling well after having a baby

- Your GP, midwife (if it is in the first few weeks after you have your baby) and health visitor are all there to support you. Do not feel embarrassed about talking to them, or that they will think you are not doing a good job as a mum.
- Your family and friends can be a great place to look for support.
- There will be local groups such as parents and toddlers, breast feeding support groups, baby massage groups and other types of groups which you can go to and meet other people in the same circumstances as you are. Your health visitor should have information about these, or you could contact your local community centre to see what is happening there.
- There are many online resources which you can use as well. We've given a list of the ones we found useful. Try them and find one or 2 that work for you.



Useful websites and other resources

Some of the mums we met in the Falkirk area found Moodjuice was really useful. This is a resource to support people's mental health and wellbeing which was developed by NHS Forth Valley.

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk

Breathing Space is a resource that is funded by the Scottish Government. It has a range of on-line guides and links to other sources of help and information. There is also a telephone helpline.

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Mind has useful booklets on many mental health problems and illnesses. You can get the information from the website or order as a booklet. This is the link to the one on Understanding postnatal depression.

http://www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/post-natal_depression

Some parenting websites, as well as having advice pages which you can read, have discussion forums where you can anonymously post comments and other mums can reply and offer you advice or support. The best known of these include:

www.netmums.com - has a whole section of their Coffee House Chat about postnatal depression, including a self help guide with some exercises on it.

www.mumsnet.com - is one of the best known parenting sites, and offers pages of advice as well as forums addressing all types of topics.

www.gurgle.com - has a focus on pregnancy and early parenting, especially first time parents, and again a whole range of forums where you can get advice and support from other parents.

www.lltff.com is a new nhs 24 venture which helps you to help yourself with an online forum, support and advice.

There are many other websites out there too, so you can explore until you find one you are comfortable using.

What happens next?

Outside the Box will speak to the mums who gave us their help with this paper again, and to some of the workers who support them, and see if there are any ways we can continue to work with them.

If you have an idea about starting something in your area which would help mums who are having a difficult time, we would be pleased to hear from you. We can help you make a plan, get the contacts you need to get started, and find funding. Please contact Outside The Box at:

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