



maintaining gains and relapse prevention

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Coping with depression during pregnancy and following the birth:
A Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy-based self-management guide for women

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Make a plan for how you will maintain your progress

module 5



Maintaining gains and relapse prevention

The goal of learning self-management skills for depression is not only to help you to feel better in the short term — but also to help you maintain your progress and gains and continue to stay well in the years to come. For this reason, another important part of self-management of depression is making a plan for how you will maintain your progress and reduce your risk of relapse.

Many women who have experienced depression during pregnancy or following the birth are worried about having a return of symptoms if they have another child. Women with a past history of depression during pregnancy or following the birth are at higher risk of having another episode, however, many women do not go on to have depression in later pregnancies. In one recent study, almost 60% of women who experienced depression following the birth of a baby did not develop depression in their next pregnancy. In addition, there are a number of things that you can do to reduce the chances of a return of symptoms or relapse. This section will provide you with some ideas on how you can do this.

Steps to Success

The most important thing that you can do to prevent a future increase in symptoms is:

KEEP ON DOING WHAT WORKS TO IMPROVE YOUR MOOD USING THE SKILLS YOU HAVE LEARNED AND THAT YOU HAVE PUT INTO PRACTICE. Even when you have been feeling better for a period of time, it is still important to keep practicing these skills and doing the activities that helped you feel better. Just like exercise, if you stop using self-management strategies then you usually start to lose the benefits. The best way to prevent a relapse in symptoms of depression over time is to actively use your self-management skills on a daily basis. Here is a review of how you can continue to practice key strategies from each of the main components of CBT.



KEEP THIS GUIDE AVAILABLE TO YOU FOR REVIEWING THE SKILLS AS WELL AS TO IMPROVE THE SKILLS YOU MAY HAVE SKIPPED OVER THE FIRST TIME. Make sure that you put aside some time on a regular basis to “check in” with yourself about your mood. For example, you may want to fill out a depression self-assessment questionnaire such as the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (see Module 6, page 3). You could also review the list of symptoms that you recorded on your CBT diagram from the introduction section to make sure that you are aware of any symptoms of depression. It is much better to notice and work on any increases in symptoms early on before the symptoms are more severe and more difficult to manage. You may also want to reread sections of this guide to make sure that you are continuing to work on your self-management skills.

KEEP BUILDING YOUR NESTS. As you will remember from earlier in this guide, good self-care is a very important part of maintaining good mental health. Many women are tempted to cut back on their self-care activities once they start to feel better. However, this is a mistake. Ongoing self-care is an important part of maintaining your progress and reducing your risk of relapse. It is a good idea to check in with yourself from time to time about how you are doing in each of the areas of self-care: Nutrition, Exercise, Sleep and Rest, Time for Yourself and Support. One good way to do this is to reread the self-care section of this guide (and answer the 5 Questions for each area of NEST-S) on a regular basis to make sure that you are keeping to your self-care program. If you find that you have cut back on your self-care in one of these areas, you can use the “Making Positive Changes” section of this guide to help you to gradually get back on track.

KEEPING ACTIVE AND SOLVING PROBLEMS. In the “Making Positive Changes” section of this guide, you learned how to set SMART goals. Most people start by making changes to some of the important areas of self-care. If you are doing well with your self-care, you may want to use the goal-setting steps that you learned in this section to help you with tackling other behaviours that you would like to change. In the problem-solving section, you learned how to apply the steps of problem-solving to different problems in your life. Checking in with yourself on a regular basis to identify behaviours or life problems that are making you feel that way and making a plan for change can help you to maintain good mental health.

Encourage yourself, especially if you are facing new challenges

module 5



IDENTIFYING AND CHALLENGING DEPRESSIVE THINKING PATTERNS. In the “Challenging Depressive Thinking” section of this guide, you learned how to identify and challenge depressive thoughts and to replace these with more healthy thinking patterns. Sometimes you need to remind yourself of the facts in order to maintain a healthy perspective - otherwise old unhealthy patterns of thinking can sneak back into your life and start to create problems again. Also, sometimes new negative thinking patterns are triggered and need to be challenged just like older negative thinking patterns you have already worked on. Keeping track of changes in your mood and thinking patterns can help you to keep your skills sharp in this area. You may have developed some healthy thinking statements to challenge some of your more common negative thoughts. Continue using them to encourage yourself, especially if you are facing new challenges that can trigger old thought habits.

In addition to continuing to check in with yourself about your symptoms and practicing your self-management skills, there are a few other things that you can do to help you to reduce your chances of relapse.

KNOW AND BE PREPARED FOR YOUR “RED FLAGS”. “Red flags” are events or experiences that can be stressful for anyone (see the following page for a list). Just like everyone else, people who have experienced depression in the past are more at risk for an increase in symptoms when they are coping with stress. When people are aware of the types of situations that are “red flags” for them, then they can be better prepared to either take steps to prevent significant increases in symptoms and to respond quickly when symptoms begin to rise.



Red flags are events or experiences that can sometimes worsen mood. Both positive and negative life events can be red flags. Here are some examples:

Red Flags	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnancy and postpartum • Parenting stressors • Relationship abuse or conflict • Moving or house renovations • Other problems with housing • Financial troubles or changes in income • Ministry involvement in own or family's life • Health problems (self or others) • Continued sleep deprivation, disruption or other sleep issues • Drinking or using drugs beyond recommended intake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling depressed • Having too many responsibilities • Getting separated or divorced • Starting a new relationship • Getting engaged or married • Death of a loved one • Death of a pet • Starting or returning to work or school • Other work or school stress • Any other life events involving change. • Any other stressful experiences • Stopping medications for depression or anxiety

If you can see that a “red flag” situation is coming, it is especially important to make sure that you are practicing good self-care and that you are using your self-management skills.

Think about what you know about how you tend to respond during times of stress (e.g., don't eat enough, pull back from friends and family). Have some specific ideas about what you can do to be prepared for this challenging period (e.g., ensure you have some microwave dinners in the freezer, make plans to get together or talk to friends at a specific time).



HAVE A PERSONAL WELLNESS PLAN. There is a saying, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” Make your plan while you are feeling well and before any signs and symptoms of depression return so that you can put it into action more easily should some of your symptoms recur or you have some ‘red flags’.

For example, a sign that you are at risk of a mood dip may be that you are starting to do everything yourself again. So, you want to have ideas about how to keep your social support strong, e.g. seeking professional help, sharing responsibilities and reaching out to friends.

My Red Flags	Signs and Symptoms (What to watch for)	What I can Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Doing everything myself• Moving	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling overwhelmed• Letting daily tasks slip	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask my mom to watch the kids• Set some small goals with my partner• Go for a walk with friend

Based on what you learned from your recent experience with depression, fill out the table below.

My Red Flags	Signs and Symptoms (What to watch for)	What I can Do

**If you do experience an increase in symptoms . . .**

Remember that symptom “lapses” (e.g., a temporary decrease in mood) are very common, especially during “red flags”. They do not necessarily mean you are having a full blown relapse of your depression. Lapses are very common and typically pass with time and some effort to apply skills that you have learned. Think of a lapse as a “reminder call” to get back to using your self-management skills, especially any ones that you may have stopped using. Remind yourself that you typically feel better in a few days or weeks. In the meantime focus on continuing to do the usual things in your life even when you are feeling low. Keep in mind that many lapses are predictable (see Red Flags section above) and sometimes even avoidable.

- Pull out your personal wellness plan and make sure that you are following it.
- If the symptoms do not go away after a short while or are very upsetting or disruptive for you then make an appointment to review your concerns with a health professional so that you can get additional help or treatment if necessary.

If you become pregnant again, there are also a number of other things that you can do that are helpful.

- Continue to monitor your symptoms throughout your pregnancy and following the birth. That way, if you notice that you are having increased symptoms of depression, you will be able to ask for support.
- Keep in touch with your health care provider over the course of your next pregnancy and following the birth. Let your health care provider know about any symptoms of depression or anxiety that you may be having. This will make it easier for you to get the help that you might need sooner and can reduce the chances of a relapse.
- Plan for practical support during pregnancy and following the birth.
- Plan for emotional support during pregnancy and following the birth.
- Continue to use this guide to help you to practice effective mood self-management skills.



Grace's Story

One woman's journey using this guide

Grace is 32 years old. She has been married for 5 years to David and gave birth to her first baby 6 weeks ago. She had been working in an executive administrative position for 8 years, a job she describes as stimulating and demanding. She had taken an early leave during her 3rd trimester for medical reasons and because she was having difficulty managing her many responsibilities due to lack of energy, poor sleep and concentration problems. She had attributed this to being pregnant but has continued to feel 'low' and 'overwhelmed' following her baby's birth.

At her scheduled 6 week follow-up visit, Grace burst into tears when her family physician, Dr. Lee asked her how she was doing. Grace confided that she was worried about herself as a mother but hadn't talked to anyone about it because she felt ashamed that she was having a hard time coping. She was used to being successful and accomplishing a lot in her day. She had some ongoing pain from childbirth that made certain tasks difficult.

Her husband had been helping out a lot but she dreaded being alone all day with the baby. The weather and her physical discomfort made it difficult for her to get out of the house. She wondered what was wrong with her that she couldn't enjoy her baby and was so angry at her husband.

She said the worst part was being so tired all the time but not being able to fall asleep when the baby was sleeping. She couldn't stop thinking about all the things she had to do and what a terrible job she was doing as a mother.

After she completed the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS), Dr. Lee provided her with information from this guide about depression during pregnancy and following the birth of a baby. Dr. Lee also booked follow up appointments with Grace and arranged for a public health nurse to help Grace work through the sections of this guide.



Here's an overview of how the different components of CBT from this guide helped Grace with her depression:

FROM THE INFORMATION SECTION: When she read this part of the guide, Grace was surprised to learn that depression affects thoughts, feelings, behaviours and body responses. She was reassured to learn that her symptoms are treatable and that she could learn skills to help her change the behaviours and thoughts that were contributing to her depression.

FROM THE SELF-CARE SECTION: When Grace read this part of the guide, she learnt about the importance of taking care of herself in order to feel well. As she read through the nutrition section and answered the nutrition worksheet, Grace realized that she was only eating before noon once a week. Grace also realized that since she had stopped working, she had had little social contact with her friends and that this was probably contributing to her symptoms of depression.

FROM MAKING POSITIVE CHANGES SECTION: Grace set a beginning goal of eating a protein bar twice a week while her son has his first morning feed. She talked with her husband and they decided he would care for the baby for an hour after work once a week so that she could meet a friend for a walk.

Over time she gradually set additional goals to address other important areas of her life that were affecting her well-being. Grace used the problem solving steps to address her 'to do' list. She started with one item at a time to find a solution to managing her daily tasks. This helped her increase her confidence in coping and she found she was able to relax and fall asleep more easily

FROM THE CHALLENGING DEPRESSIVE THINKING SECTION: Grace learned to identify when she is having unfair and unhelpful thoughts about herself and her situation. She then worked with her public health nurse to generate more helpful and healthy realistic statements that she used to "talk back" to her depressive thoughts when they arose. She wrote these on "coping cards" that she reads over when these thoughts are bothering her.

Feel more confident in caring for your baby

module 5



FROM MAINTAINING GAINS AND RELAPSE PREVENTION SECTION: Once Grace had made significant progress, she and Dr. Lee made a summary list of the all of skills and ideas that she found helpful in managing her depression. She also made a specific plan for ensuring that she continues to regularly practice her skills. She and Dr. Lee also identified what her “early warning signs” might be if her depression were to return and talked about what to do if this happened (e.g. make Dr.’s appointment, review list of skills learned in treatment, etc.).

FROM THE APPENDICES SECTION: Grace’s husband David joined her during a visit from the public health nurse and together they reviewed the tipsheet ‘What Your Loved Ones Can Do to Support You’. David learned what he could do to support Grace, and in particular that she really needed his help to have breaks from caring for the baby after long days alone.

Grace gradually began to feel less depressed and more confident in caring for her baby. Her mood improved and she began to enjoy spending time alone with her son. Although she still experiences low moods from time to time, as everyone does, she now feels empowered to manage her symptoms.



We hope this guide has helped you to learn more about yourself and provided you with some ideas about how to improve your sense of well-being so that you can truly enjoy the 'great moments' of being a mother. Good luck on your journey.