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Caring for yourself is caring for your baby

Parenthood is a time of transition. It requires mums and dads to mobilise a great deal of their resources and energy. New parents have to adapt to their new roles with enormous ongoing demands and responsibilities. In preparing for these changes, *Towards Parenthood* aims to:

- encourage you to take care of yourself so you can take care of your family.
- provide ideas on self-care and stress busters, both during pregnancy and when your baby arrives.
- assist with planning for emotional and lifestyle changes to smooth the transition to parenthood.

Self-care and stress

New parents don't necessarily feel 'on top of the world' in the months following childbirth. Some people love being a parent right from the beginning, while others take much longer to adjust. You may find you need to learn different ways of managing stress to those you have used in the past.

You can cope with stress in 'helpful' or 'unhelpful' ways. Many of your patterns of coping were learned during childhood—for example, hiding in your room when your parents argued (withdrawal).

It can be useful to think of 'stress' as arising from two sources: internal and external. Examples of internal stressors include feeling physically unwell, constantly worried or thinking negatively. Examples of external stressors include problems at work, relationship troubles and financial hassles. Because having a baby brings about both internal and external changes, it is considered to be a major life stress.

If a coping strategy helped you manage in the past, then you are more likely to use it again when feeling stressed. However, what helped you cope in one situation isn't always useful in another. For example, withdrawing or emotionally shutting down on your crying baby may not be helpful. In the past you may have yelled at your partner when angry—however, an infant will find this frightening, so parents often have to learn new ways of coping with relationship stress. New stages in your life can challenge you to develop new strategies.

How do you cope?

Take a few moments to reflect on how you cope with problems.

What do you do (for example, call a friend, avoid thinking about it, pray)?

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When and from whom did you learn these coping methods?

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Are they helpful? Do they solve your problems or make things worse?

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Inherited coping strategies

Parents tend to model ways of coping for children. Your parents influenced you, and you will influence your child. It is not unusual for parents to find themselves responding to their children at times of stress in ways they vowed they never would!

My coping models

Take a minute to think back to your childhood. How did your parents cope with stress?

Mother or carer

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Father or carer

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How has this influenced your coping style?

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Self-care and stress busters

Having a variety of ways to help manage stress can improve your resilience in the face of major life changes, such as becoming a parent. Consider taking on some of the suggestions in the following pages as additional coping strategies.

Some of these involve taking good care of yourself. This is a vital step in being better able to cope with pregnancy and the constant demands of parenthood. Self-care will give you some resilience to deal with the day-to-day demands of parenting and ensures the best environment for your growing baby while you are pregnant. Research studies have shown that chronic stress during pregnancy is linked with some physical and emotional problems in infants. This makes stress an important target for mums-to-be. Incorporating small acts of self-care into your day and your week can have a positive impact on your mood and on your developing baby. It can influence energy levels and resilience as well as how you feel about yourself.

Life stress—how do you rate?

There are times when life can feel out of your control. For most this is an uncomfortable or stressful feeling. This is especially the case when you are coping with a lot of change or are burdened by a lot of things happening at once. The activity on page 46 may help you measure the degree of stress in your life.

Life events

Tick Yes/No next to the events you are facing or have recently dealt with.

	Yes	No
Changing/leaving job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pregnancy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having a new baby	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partner problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Housing problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Migration/relocation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Financial issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Marital separation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Death of spouse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Death of close family member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health difficulties in family member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spouse begins/stops work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change in recreation/social activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change in sleeping habits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change in number of family get-togethers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Legal problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Christmas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal injury/illness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Add up the number of ticks in the Yes column. The more ticks, the greater the chance you may be experiencing signs of emotional stress. Obviously, these stressors are not equal: some have more weight than others. If you are feeling 'stressed out' by any or all of the events in your life, it may help to learn and use some stress management tools.

Nutrition and physical health

Research has shown that women who are stressed in pregnancy are less likely to eat a nutritious diet. This may lead to inadequate pregnancy weight gain, which may bring about a pre-term delivery and low birth weight. Managing stress during pregnancy is therefore