

## Stress and Behaviours

Being a new mother is tough. Of course, you don't need this leaflet to tell you that. As a new mum you may have given up work and hobbies, gone through a difficult pregnancy or childbirth or now feel that the demands placed on you are way too difficult to handle (lack of sleep, feeding times, juggling childcare, housework and relationships). On top of this, everyone else giving you 'good advice' and expecting miracles of you. It's enough make you want to give up isn't it? Or do you just find yourself working yourself into the ground to be the best mum you can or to please others?

What if the way you respond to all this stress was making the problem worse? What is there is another way to cope? This leaflet has been written not only for mothers' with post-natal depression, but also for those who are feeling stressed out by her new roles and responsibilities as a mother.

### How stress affects behaviours

Amy is mother of 6 month old Daniel. Her partner James works long days and often doesn't get home until after Daniel is asleep. Amy is constantly 'on the go'. She can't relax when there is so much to do, but she is lucky if she gets to shower by 3pm. She doesn't see her friends anymore as she hasn't the time. Daniel's crying often upsets her and she doesn't take him out as much as she used to. She often feels lonely but when James gets home she is irritable and snappy with him.'

It is easy to see how anyone acting like this is likely to feel stressed, tired out or even depressed. Amy's actions tell us that she is stressed, but what if her actions were feeding her stress?

### Stress and Avoidance

Can you think of a time when you were stressed recently? Can you think about how you reacted to your stress? Below are typical avoidance behaviour examples of what one might do in response to stress:

- Avoid making decisions
- Avoid socialising and seeing people
- Avoid engaging in hobbies
- Avoid looking after oneself and eating well



*Can you think of things that you are avoiding? Write these ideas below.*

## Stress and Unhelpful Responses

Despite feeling lonely all day, when Amy is stressed she often snaps at James. This often ends up with an argument. This is an example of an 'unhelpful response to stress' as her reactions are making her feel worse and leaving her feeling increasingly isolated. Examples of unhelpful responses are:

- Acting irritably and pushing others away
- Using alcohol or drugs to feel better
- Trying too hard to please others
- Setting too high standards for oneself



*Can you think of your unhelpful responses to stress? Write these ideas below.*

## Tips for Managing Stress with Behaviours

The good news is that changing the way one behaves can improve the way one copes with stress. Below are some tips to help you to do this:

- **Prioritise your chores.** Accept that you cannot achieve everything (information sheet \* on Problem Solving may help you to do this)
- **Start to look after yourself better** – try to get the basics achieved such as replacing unhealthy snacks with healthy snacks.
- **See your friends.** Arrange to see your friends in advance as its good to have things to look forward to. Don't be afraid to assert yourself when asking for partner or family for help with childcare. Taking a break from being a mother will help you to be a better mother
- **Do things you enjoy.** Even 5 minutes of reading a book can help restore a sense of wellbeing
- **Watch out and find alternatives for unhelpful behaviours.** For example, if you find yourself smoking more than you use to 'de-stress' explore alternatives to this behaviour such as relaxation, taking a walk or phoning a friend.

**Sources used to write this information sheet:**

BHFT Stress Course Material