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Overcoming anxiety and loneliness as a first-time (academic) mum in times of Covid

Usually, I do not write self-help blogs. I write academic books and articles. And even if I am teaching gender and women's studies, it doesn't get too personal (most times). But I promised myself to write a small blog as soon as I would feel better as a person and as a first time mum, in case it might help some other first time mums. If this sounds too much like an academic essay, you know why.

I was very lucky to experience my pregnancy, birth and first postpartum months before the Covid pandemics started. At 36, I had a very relaxed and healthy pregnancy. My partner and my parents supported me while awaiting delivery (I went 11 days overdue), as well as in the labour ward and in the following days. I had an induced but rapid birth with no intervention, and I got Domino midwives checking on me for the first 5 days after birth. My baby girl Zoe slept, fed and grew like a champ, with breastfeeding going very well from the start and only 50 grams lost at the first weight check. I could attend antenatal and postnatal classes, meet-ups with other mums and baby massage groups in the first few months. I was also on paid maternity leave for 6.5 months and could take unpaid for 2 more months. So I was definitely in a privileged position in so many ways.

And yet, I still struggled, particularly with anxiety and loneliness (we live in Ireland and our families are in different countries). I had severe insomnia and insomnia-related anxiety (or anxiety-related insomnia) in the days after birth and in the months that followed. In combination with non-stop breastfeeding and postpartum hormones this was almost pushing me to the brink a number of times.

Luckily it was before Covid, so my parents managed to visit me twice (!) in January 2020, hopping on planes and buses in their late 60s. My partner also did his very best, even if he was coping with his own stress as a first time dad. I also tapped into the lovely support networks existing in Cork city: Cuidiú, professional doulas, a fantastic homeopath named Pat, Postnatal Depression Ireland, psychotherapy and acupuncture, etc. I was determined to get better and eventually I did, even though at times it seemed like I was in a perpetual anxious cycle with no end in sight.

The winter felt very long, with so many sleepless nights and obsessive, anxious thoughts over sleeping and not sleeping...and then just when we got a bit more confident as parents and our girl got a bit older and we were preparing for a long trip back home(s), the pandemic happened. My partner had no more freelance work, so we could share the care, and I just started to relax into motherhood and enjoy my baby more and more. After all, I was still on maternity leave, and everyone was home anyway. As a first time mum without a village (and as a former academic nomad of many years), I was well trained in coping with isolation even before lockdown. I started going for a bike ride every morning, when Zoe had her first nap. The weather got better and the long walks with my baby in the sling were now more pleasant. Our girl started smiling, and I felt that I understood her more. I joined a number of Facebook groups that I wished I knew at the start of my journey, and realised that my instincts had brought me to attachment parenting and to follow my baby's lead when it came to feeding and sleeping.

The summer came and we managed to be in Italy for a month, in between pandemics' peaks and while Italy was still on the green list. Taking a break from the house and the usual routine was very beneficial for the three of us. My 91 years old granny could finally see her great-granddaughter. Zoe discovered pasta and hasn't looked back! Now we are back in Ireland, back at work (mainly from home), our little one is at nursery part-time, and it will be her first birthday in a few days. I feel it's time to write down some tips for other first time mums particularly in these difficult Covid times when current restrictions mean that mums-to-be are attending their check-ups and spending time in hospitals mostly on their own (see here the new Facebook group [In Our Shoes - Covid Pregnancy](#), collecting testimonies and advocating for a revision of current maternity care restrictions, which are affecting many first time mums' physical and mental health).

I hope these tips will help, especially with insomnia and anxiety. This blog is not meant as a source of medical advice, I am aware this is only my perspective. Do not hesitate to look for support if needed, there are plenty of resources and plenty of lovely people out there who can help.

1. Enlist some support, but be mindful of your own space

Living abroad meant that my parents were over for two weeks at our place while waiting for delivery and in the aftermath of birth. One week after the birth of our baby girl, my partner's mum was also over for a week. While we greatly benefited from the support, I believe it also increased my anxiety to be under everyone's loving but also apprehensive gaze in such a vulnerable moment. I slept three hours the night before the (unplanned) induction, had no sleep the night before birth and had very little sleep also the night after birth due to the other baby in the room...so by the time I came home I was a wreck, and having literally no space to breathe and relax didn't help. While it was great to have my mum around, my partner, baby and I did not have space to bond as a family and to be just us. Limiting visitors, therefore, is essential in the first few days while recovering.

At the same time, in the weeks that follow, support is fundamental, especially when it comes to basic housing chores. I did not expect how time-consuming and exhausting cluster feeding will be, and how ravenous I would become. I was glad I had stocked up the freezer with basic dishes and energy snacks before the birth, so that I could just reheat something between breastfeeding sessions. Neighbours and friends brought some very welcomed cooked dinners when we had no energy to make our own food. A few months later, at the peak of my anxiety, I found a lovely Italian lady named Anna who came to our place to cook for three hours, twice a week. Her help really made a difference and her dishes nourished all of us.

2. 'Sleep when baby sleeps', even if you are a control-freak

Well-intentioned relatives and a myriad of internet pages suggest to every new mum to 'sleep when baby sleeps', as if it would be the easiest and most blissful thing in the world. Drop the household chores, leave Netflix, just rest when the baby rests and you'll be fine, the advice goes. Except that as a new mum you are in a state of awe,

hyperalertness and anxiety due to the fact that your life has completely changed and you have a little human fully dependent on you for survival. Plus the pregnancy and birth hormones are all over the place, you are sweating buckets of liquids away and your uterus is literally shrinking at every feed. Not sleeping or sleeping irregularly (and not being able to sleep as soon as the baby dozes off!), therefore, is quite normal, as your body adjusts and you adjust to your new life.

If you are like me, however, and want to be supermum, you will feel that you are underperforming in the sleep department instead of cutting yourself some slack. Don't. That aggravates the problem and the more you obsess over sleep, the more likely it won't come, that is insomnia's vicious circle. This is compounded by the baby's fragmented sleep, and by the fact that there is no schedule whatsoever in the first newborn stage. Being a neurotic control-freak, the absolute lack of schedule completely threw me off.

Also, my baby only slept great for the first three or four hours and then started grunting very loudly in the early morning hours (probably trapped wind). So I would put enormous pressure on myself to 'sleep as soon as baby sleeps' in the attempt of catching those first continuous hours before the waking and grunting started. I would calculate my baby's wake and sleep time in an attempt to control the uncontrollable, and optimize hers and my sleep. I would read endless baby sleep blogs and web pages, and start obsessing about scheduling naps and not keeping the baby awake too long during the day.

I went through all the various stages of 'momsomnia': all night awake, awake every other night, asleep with baby and awake from 2 or 3 am, awake for a few hours in between feeds, all possible combinations. This started to improve with time, when I 'surrendered' and accepted the fact that I could not control my baby's sleep but I could try to regain control of my own sleep by taking care of myself. I also realised that my only way to survive as a breastfeeding insomniac mum was to bedshare while feeding to sleep and to happily engage in all the common 'sleep mistakes'.

3. Bedsharing, feeding to sleep, and other 'sleep mistakes'

As an insomniac mum, I would often be up all night and then have the best sleep the following night, when I was so shattered that my body shut down. I would make sure to stay up and active till sunset (around 4 pm in winter) , then I would often take a late afternoon nap with my baby, wake with baby for a feed and dinner, and keep sleeping all night with my little girl safely curled next to me in bed, barely noticing her feeding away. I realised that these nights of 'surrender' could set the example for the other nights, and started to implement some sort of bedtime routine for myself from around four months onwards (I only discovered [this great article](#) a few months later).

I ditched the alarm clock from the bedroom, banned screens in the evening, made myself herbal tea and headed to bed with the baby by 8pm, first reading a nursery book

and then dimming the lights while feeding to sleep. Breastfeeding itself is making both mum and baby sleepy, especially in the first months. This helped me greatly in navigating the four months sleep regression and the multiple dream feeds each night. My best friend in Italy had done the same with her little girl, who was an all night feeder and attached to her breast all night long.

Co-sleeping (sharing a room, with the baby in a cot or side cot) is considered the safest option until six months, and bed-sharing is also a great option if done safely. This goes against the advice of the main baby sleep gurus however, especially those who advocate for the 'eat-play-sleep' sequence and to put the baby down 'drowsy but awake', without feeding to sleep so as not to reinforce 'wrong sleep associations'. This is done in the attempt to get the baby used to sleep in his or her cot without assistance from the early months. I only later discovered these theories are highly disputed by supporters of attachment parenting and gentle sleep.

Breastfeeding is a very powerful way to provide comfort, calmness and relaxation alongside food and sleep. Sleep is developmental and the baby will self-settle at his or her own pace when ready. Mine is starting to self-settle and sleep without feeding for longer stretches now at 12 months, after learning to sleep in the cot at nursery. She is now in her sidecarred cot which prevents her from rolling off the bed, and still stirs a few times a night for a dream feed.

Even if you follow attachment parenting and 'gentle sleep', it doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to make things easier for yourself if you can. My little one always had 45 minutes naps and would only sleep longer if I napped next to her. Contact-napping every day would drive me crazy however, so I kept feeding her to sleep then 'ninja-roll' away after slowly unlatching her with my finger. She gradually learned to nap on her own. I always respond immediately if she needs a feed and resettle for longer naps - we have a small camera connected to our phones to monitor her. If you can encourage that rather than contact-napping, you have a few precious moments of rest in the day.

I also wished I introduced a bottle of expressed milk in the first few weeks rather than waiting a few months for fear of compromising breastfeeding, once your supply is established introducing a bottle can help you to delegate some tasks to dad or other family members and have some time on your own.

4. Self-care for the body, and the mind will follow

At the height of my insomnia, I tried all sorts of homeopathic remedies, herbal teas, and even tart cherry juice. What really helped though, was healthy food, exercise and some me time. As a first time anxious mum it is very easy to neglect our needs and put the baby needs ahead. In the first days, I would even hesitate to leave the baby to take a shower. But self-care is really important to feel better and to feel like yourself (even in your 'new mum' version).

Being well nourished and well hydrated is part of self-care and is especially important if breastfeeding. It helps with sleep, too. Making sure to check your intake of vitamins and minerals is crucial: a magnesium supplement and some additional vitamin C really helped me with sleep and overall energy. Your protein and iron intake also needs to be checked, especially if it was low during pregnancy and you are a vegetarian, as in my case. I also started to limit the intake of stimulants, I was already off coffee but I also stopped eating chocolate, which I was scoffing in huge quantities in the first few weeks! I have also been off alcohol since the start of my pregnancy, which now means that regular beers taste funky as I am so used to alcohol-free ones.

Together with healthy food, exercise and movement was my life line in the first difficult months after birth. We are lucky to live in a relatively green area close to the city. I went out several times a day with my baby in the sling, rain or shine, and made sure to have at least an hour of walking. Having gone from being very active before and during pregnancy to being homebound and not able to exercise enough was really taking a toll. Babywearing was extremely helpful because it allowed me to get out of the house, and to get my baby to sleep immediately if I had something to do or was frustrated with nap attempts on the bed. To these days, Zoe falls asleep instantly in the sling - even if I carry her less and less often, she is 13kg! When my partner was home during lockdown, I could finally take a bike ride every day during the baby's first nap, and did so everyday, almost religiously, for three months. I really enjoyed the exercise and me time after six months, and it had a very beneficial impact on my mood and ability to sleep.

I am still struggling with sleep some nights, especially since my little one continues to be a frequent waker at one year old. Most nights, however, I had worked, exercised and lifted my baby enough times to fall asleep in a few minutes!

5. 'This too shall pass', even if it doesn't look like it now

Parenting is hard, and breastfeeding a baby around the clock while surviving on broken sleep is even harder. In the aftermath of birth, everyone focuses on the baby, while the mum receives little or no attention. I tried to raise the issue of insomnia with my doctor and public health nurse, but the only response I got was that there was no medication I could be given while I was breastfeeding (see however [this Facebook group](#) on breastfeeding and medication). I am glad I found other sources of support, but I believe more could be done at the level of basic health care by general practitioners and public health nurses when dealing with first time mums.

So while you find your support network, here are a few things that it is important to keep in mind while feeling particularly anxious, and that kept me going. First, even if it doesn't look like it now, it is normal to feel down and overwhelmed at times in the first weeks or months, and it will slowly change and get better, even if it doesn't look like it now. Accept that this is due to your particular position as a first time mum, and do not feel that you are underperforming as a mum. You are everything to your baby and you are good enough, really. Secondly, even if today you feel absolutely awful, don't beat yourself up

for it. Try to engage in additional self-care and tomorrow will be a different and better day, after some sleep and some food and a walk in the sun or a chat with your best friend, or after your little one reached a new milestone. Thirdly, if you reach a peak of anxiety when awake at night, try to do something that calms your mind and relaxes you, such as drawing or reading a book or some yoga. Others suggested some podcasts or meditation tracks. If you are an academic or an activist, it can also help to do some writing or keep going with a research project, because often we end up overly obsessing on baby stuff when our mind really needs some grown up stimulation and activity.

When it comes to insomnia, staying in bed trying to sleep when you feel anxious is counter-productive, because you learn to associate the bedroom with anxious thoughts. I made a point of getting up in the morning and breathing some fresh air even if I did not sleep or slept only an hour, then went for a nap after lunch or in the afternoon after a change of scenery. Also, what helped me when I was stuck in insomnia and obsessive thoughts, was to remind myself that I had done successful conference presentations and given birth (!) without sleeping the night before, so I was well able to care for a baby even without sleep. And I realised after many nights awake that those were followed by good nights, so I started to trust my body to do the right thing, and stopped worrying about not sleeping the next night. Breaking the anxiety-insomnia cycle is hard but eventually it happens. Ultimately, I accepted 'momsomnia' as a strange learning journey that was teaching me to let go. Letting go meant trusting that I did not need to do it all on my own, and that I deserved time off and self-care, as a person and as a mum.

6. Know your resources, and check the sources

In the first week after birth, I would manically search the internet for suggestions and advice around baby sleep. Most of those suggestions, however, veered towards 'cry-it-out' solutions which have been long disproved by scholarly research.

The idea that a baby should be able to 'self-settle' even when a few weeks or months old puts unnecessary pressure on new mums, who often have also to listen to uninformed advice from family members about 'spoiling' the baby too much, or being 'obsessed' with breastfeeding when feeding on demand. I luckily kept following my instincts and kept responding to my baby's cues for feeding and sleeping and providing comfort, not just in 'fourth trimester', i.e. the first three months after birth, but also later on. When you are desperate for sleep and rest, believing that the baby should start becoming more independent and accept a lack of responsiveness could seem like a solution, while in fact you might just need to vent, or have a helping hand and a nap, or someone telling you that you are doing a great job.

Here are a few sources that might be helpful for first time mums trying to navigate sleep deprivation and baby sleep, they are all veering towards attachment parenting rather than 'cry-it-out' solutions. They are not making false promises or offering magic solutions, but they are offering a space for support and advice. This international Facebook [group](#) and [website](#), The Beyond Sleep Training Project, is explicitly opposing

sleep training and is a gold mine of information for new mums. One of the sleep experts they recommend is UK based [Sarah Ockwell-Smith](#), who advocates for gentle sleeping solutions. In Ireland, the local [Cuidiú](#) Facebook pages and groups and the [Extended Breastfeeding in Ireland](#) Facebook group are excellent places to ask questions and get support. [Postnatal Depression Ireland](#) also offers support meetings and a phone line for new mums. Finally, for some humour and lightness, and to find comfort in knowing that there are other mums in the same boat, I recommend Karen McMillan's anthology of poems, [Mother Truths](#).