



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO of PANDA

## Mental Health

**We discuss mental health in women and men as new parents and the importance of asking for help and support.**

**Tiffany:** Hi everyone. We have a very special guest joining us today. The CEO of PANDA Julie Borninkhof. Julie is also a clinical psychologist who has worked with people from vulnerable and diverse communities. In this episode, we will be discussing an extremely important topic, mental health and its importance as a parent. Welcome to the podcast, Julie.

**Julie:** Hi Tiffany, Thank you so much for having me.

**Tiffany:** Well, it's great to have you. Before we get started, would you mind telling us all a little bit more about PANDA today?

**Julie:** PANDA's an amazing organization, we've been operating for the past 35 years, 37 years actually. We were established as an advocacy organization based out of the need of two mums in Victoria and have grown over all of those years to become a national organization that's now really well known for delivering the national helpline. Our helpline is one that is staffed by both clinicians and peer support volunteers and we're funded through the Commonwealth government. But we also receive additional funds from States and territories that allow us to be able to do a whole range of activity. Spanning from health professional and community education about perinatal, mental health, and wellbeing, to tools and resources, fact sheets, and a myriad of other things. And we have been working alongside our community to deliver this work for many years and are now really just focused on supporting everyone best we can as they navigate the parenting journey.

**Tiffany:** Wonderful. It's so great to hear that there is that resource out there today, and I think it's wonderful that parents can have access to so much and be able to just jump on and get that support whenever they feel they need it. So thank you so much for sharing a bit more about the amazing, what you guys do at PANDA. So Julie, for everyone listening, could you explain what mental health is and some of the common signs for a new parent, if they're struggling with their mental health?



## Episode 6: Mental Health with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Julie:** Yeah, of course. So as many people across the country know, but more and more so we're starting to talk about people can struggle with mental health and vulnerability throughout their entire lifespan. Both as children right through to older adults. The work that PANDA does focuses in on the parenting journey. So we support people during their pregnancy period, both mums and dads or same-sex birth partners. And also during the first 12 months of a baby's life. And beyond that, we then help refer on to other services. When we talk about mental health and wellbeing during the pregnancy or the first 12 months of babs life, we're really talking about people's experience and everyone is so different. So we know that mental health, when it's maintained is a wonderful thing, but when it starts to go a bit wonky, it can look and feel very different and very overwhelming for people, for a number of reasons. At PANDA, we generally deal with anxiety and feeling of depressed mood.

And when we talk about anxiety, for most of our callers who are on that journey, it feels like they're being overwhelmed with racing thoughts. Often people, when they are feeling anxious, have an upset tummy, they feel hot and sweaty at times, they feel overwhelmed, they may have racing hearts, feeling like they need to go to the toilet at unexpected times. And that real fight and flight experiences kicking in. When we talk about depressed mood or depression, we're talking about people feeling like they just want to crawl away, protect themselves, curl up under the doona and not come out. It's that feeling of being really bold and not able to lift yourself up. Your mood feels flat, you're feeling often sad and teary. Both depression and anxiety can affect your sleep, either making you want to sleep too much or not being able to sleep enough because you've got racing thoughts.

And we often speak at PANDA, with those who are calling our help line around whether or not they're having difficulty sleeping such as when their baby's sleeping. And we know then that if people just aren't able to catch a few Z's when babs are down, that they're usually having a rough time and that just becomes cumulative. The more you can't sleep, the more overwhelmed you feel and the less you feel able to function and deal with day-to-day life. At PANDA we also support people who may be feeling suicidal and unfortunately, mums and dads during this time can become more susceptible to feeling like they are just struggling so much that they're feeling so faulty and overwhelmed, that they don't want to be here anymore. So we talk to lots of parents who are feeling that way.



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Julie:** (cont...) And we also support people with a range of other mental illness, experiences that they may have had before they became parents, or may have come on while they've been within the pregnancy or first 12 months of the baby's life.

**Tiffany:** I think it's so great to have a bit more of understanding about how that might look for people, how that might feel. I know myself, with my first, I definitely struggled with some anxiety and depression post having her and did have a lot of those feelings and probably should have reached out for more help and support. And I feel now, in hindsight, looking back, it would have been great to have sought some help from someone like PANDA, to be able to understand a bit more about what I was going through and find some strategies around how to deal with that. So I think that's really useful and I can relate to a lot of the things you were talking about there myself. So it's lovely to hear that worded so beautifully from someone like yourself to really understand a bit more about what that looks like for people. So that's great.

**Julie:** I think what you just touched on there is really important in that, you would have benefited from that experience as would many, but you still parented and you still got through it. And I think that's the really important thing that we always try to remind callers, or when I get to speak to different people about their experience. Ultimately, we are all survivors and whilst we come out worse for worse sometimes and a bit more better than other times. I think it's really important to understand that many people find help within the system, whether you come to PANDA or not. And ultimately, the more we can get people to understand that PANDA's there as a free resource to parents the better. But I think ultimately, people will get through this period if they're feeling distressed, it all makes it so much easier to navigate.

**Tiffany:** Yeah, absolutely. So what are some of the effects of parental mental illness on, I guess we're talking about first time parents typically here, just so people have got a bit of an understanding there?

**Julie:** Most definitely. So as I said, there are lots of different signs and symptoms that we experience that can let you know that what you're feeling is something that needs a little bit more focus. But we often don't think about how each of those bricks of feeling and its impact go into this big wall that comes up in front of us and feels really overwhelming.



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Julie:** (cont...) When you're a new parent I think we forget that just working in a space where we don't have a rule book, we've never done this job before, our core identity, i.e the things that we were doing before we became a parent, all of a sudden that completely shifted. And for any of us who love working and get a sense of self and our identities are forged on what we do for a living before we become a parent, that separation from our workplace or our role becomes really difficult to navigate.

And all of a sudden we set a drift in this space where we have this new little bundle of love that we're supposed to be really thankful for and enjoy. So society and social media and advertising tells us, but it's really overwhelming. We know that having mental distress during this period affects not only how you form a relationship with your baby and how functional you feel, but it can also really impact on your relationship with your partner. If you still have that relationship throughout this period, it can impact on your relationship with your families and your friends. It can impact on how you seek help, because if you don't trust your gut and you're feeling really faulty often you think that you're making it all up and therefore you don't reach out for support. Or you think that there's something wrong with you and you feel the sense of shame around having to ask for support. Or for many people they've never felt this way. So not having a word around how to say I'm struggling is a really big thing.

But ultimately, the impact can be huge. It can impact how you form a relationship with yourself because for many people, this is the first time, as mums they really do feel this sense of failure. And that can be really confronting because it means that you're left with all of these displaced relationships and things falling down, and then not trusting yourself. So we know that for people who have left this feeling go on and on, it can really take a long time to feel like they're back on track. But ultimately, you've got to trust that flag that you have within you and reach out for support when you first see it.

**Tiffany:** It's good to know that there is, like we discussed before, that support, that place to reach out to, but I guess knowing some of the effects and some of the impacts that can have, if you don't seek help soon enough, or what have you is good to have in the back of your mind, I guess, too.



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Tiffany:** (cont...) Just to reiterate or really concrete that feeling of understanding that seeking help and support early on is probably key in this situation, particularly when it comes to, like you said, trusting your gut. If something feels wrong just to reach out for help or talk about it with someone and ask, is this normal? Is this normal to feel this way? Because like you said, there's no rule book. And as a parent, that's so challenging knowing that you really, you get an instruction manual with pretty much anything these days, but you don't get one with your child. So not knowing what to do is normal, I guess, too, though.

**Julie:** Completely and I think that's the other thing. There just is no normal when your world's flipped upside down, you don't feel like you've got time to go to the toilet to have a shower to eat and get yourself on track. All of those day-to-day things that you feel made you normal and those routines are completely disrupted. So every bit of that sort of journey is wonky again.

**Tiffany:** Yes. Absolutely. So what are some daily activities or routines parents can do to help maintain good mental health Julie?

**Julie:** It's a great question. And I think first and foremost, it helps to think back on what it was that you enjoyed doing prior to having a baby because everyone's tastes are different in terms of the things that they enjoy or don't. But ultimately, we know that getting some sleep when your baby's sleeping, getting out in the fresh air, even if it's just to sit in the garden with the sun on your back, if the sun's out, taking your baby for a walk or finding some space or somebody to look after your baby, while you're able to then go down and have a walk around the block. Looking up, we forget that when we focus in on a new bar or a task that we're having to attend to, we forget to look up and remember that we're part of a bigger space and a bigger environment. And looking up really helps.

Doing deep breathing. When we've become really anxious and stressed often our breathing becomes shallow, our shoulders hunch in and we find ourselves not getting as much oxygen in our system, which actually helps our blood flow and helps us to feel stronger and healthier. So taking deep breaths or doing a mindfulness exercise or relaxation exercise can be really helpful. Seeking support through your friends and your family. Reaching out to your loved ones and the people that you can just bounce off.



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Julie:** (cont...) Often people feel that they can't do that because they may catch on that they're not doing okay, but we know that being able to seek support or just say hi to somebody is a wonderful thing during this period. And then pulling up hobbies and things that you enjoyed prior to having your baby, like music. And if you like to dance, dance. So if you like to garden try to make some time to garden.

And all of this can be done with your baby there, within a bassinet or on the floor, or however you need to make the baby safe so that you can do those things, or if you're pregnant, do it in moderation.

**Tiffaney:** Yeah, exactly. So Julie, we know it's important to ask for support and help, but do you have any suggestions on how to ask for help?

**Julie:** I think first and foremost, remembering that there is no right or wrong way. Often, in relationships or when we feel we need support we will wait for the right moment, or I think we need to be able to know how to ask for it. But the reality is there's never a right moment. There's never a right or wrong way to say that you're having a rough time. So I think first it's just saying, I'm not feeling okay and you don't have to be able to name it. You don't have to be able to put it into words. You don't need to be able to string a sentence together fully. Because you're probably tired and sleep deprived and feeling really overwhelmed. And we know that being within a pregnancy period or the first 12 months of a baby's life, when you're really tired, you've often got word salad going on and it can be really difficult to string things together.

**Julie:** So I think firstly, it's about just reaching out and saying, "Hey, I'm having a rough time." And taking the conversation from there. If that's all you feel up to raising and just saying to somebody, "I can't talk about it beyond that. I just need you to know I'm having a rough time." That's okay. The other thing I think is when people call our helpline, that's all they can sometimes say to us. And they'll say, "I need some help." We'll say, "Are you safe?" We'll get a little bit of information about how babs going and how you're going. We lead everything with questions that are simple to answer, but you, at any point can say, no, I need to call back because I don't feel up to talking today. So whether you're talking to a health professional, or you're talking to a loved one, or your partner, go into the conversation knowing that there's no right or wrong, that any way that you can just put your hand up and say, I'm struggling, is good.





Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Tiffany:** That's great advice. I think like you said, everyone will ask questions differently, won't they? And if you are feeling a bit overwhelmed or you're extremely tired, like you said, I think it can be very tricky to string a sentence together or really articulate what you're feeling. So, yeah, that's great advice there too Julie, thank you so much. So do mental health issues differ between women and men as new parents, Julie?

**Julie:** So we know that for every individual their experience and the way they would describe their experience is different. And then amongst genders, there's also differences in terms of how people experience mental health and vulnerability. We know that for many men, their experience of stress and anxiety and depression is to feel overwhelmed and to come really frustrated and want to fix it. And when they can't fix it, then they get quite angry. And that doesn't mean angry as in, they're going to lash out and hurt somebody, quite often, they're turning that inward or it's impacting on their capacity to engage at work or they're working too much or turning to having a few extra drinks of alcohol, so it can be really different that way. But we also know that men don't talk about their emotional experience generally as openly as women do. And that's a well-known fact, it doesn't mean that some men are unable to put into words what they're experiencing emotionally, but it's just not as natural for men to talk about mental health and wellbeing and the symptoms of anxiety or depression as readily as women.

Quite often, they'll use other words around, work's not going so well, I'm having trouble feeling like I can play sport or engage with a local club or it's coming out in relationships in other ways. Whereas for women, their experience of mental illness or mental vulnerability is often very much turned inward. So they're self judging, feeling that they're faulty, lacking in hope and that there's anywhere to turn that they're going to get through it or feel like they're able to cope as a mum. So I think there's these reflections on experience, but again, that stereotyping at times, and it can be different for everybody.

**Tiffany:** I think what you said there too about men, typically not being able to necessarily talk about their emotions the same way women can. And that's definitely been my experience generally, not with every man, but typically that's been my experience. When even just talking with my close family members, like my uncles or my brothers, and so forth, they often do struggle to be able to really express the way they're feeling if they are feeling a bit down or what have you.



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Tiffany:** (cont...) So I think that's great to just shed a bit of light on that too. And I know myself, yeah, just looking back at my own experiences, it's very easy to internalize, particularly if you are not sure about what's going on, but then that verbalization tends to come out more with that emotional feeling I think.

**Julie:** I think across the country, Australia at large, has always been, we've always found it difficult because we're Aussie battlers and we're trying to get on with stuff, we've always found it difficult to put into words when we struggle. Nobody wants to be in a space where they feel vulnerable and we all avoid negative emotions and negative experiences and pain of any kinds. So we all avoid it regardless of our background. I think, as we see school children starting to get exposed to more of the meditation and emotional awareness and smiling minds activities at State schools are doing in Victoria and across the country, we know that people are starting to have a different way of talking about mental health and wellbeing from a strength based perspective. So hopefully that'll change, but you're right, in terms of our history we've never really skilled people up in how to talk about their mental vulnerability.

**Tiffany:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think I felt myself, I was a single mum for a period of time as well, really felt like there was this expectation of having to do it all and do it all really well. Be this super mum, be this wonder woman who has a job and looks after the kids and manages the home and does it all and seamlessly.

**Julie:** Yeah, not possible.

**Tiffany:** So I think there's been those social pressures as well, that there is definitely that stereotype there, where there's okay, well, these days you're expected to do it all and do it well. So I think stamping on those a little bit and realizing that we do actually need support and it's okay to ask for help it really is key.

**Julie:** I've always used this metaphor of even rocks crumble, and whether we're talking to men or women that really works because ultimately, you can't hold it together all of the time. You're going to have days where you just feel like crumbling and that's okay. It doesn't make you weak. It doesn't make you a bad parent. It just makes you somebody who's real and is fully feeling what they're going through. And ultimately, we are all pressure cookers.





Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Julie:** (cont...) If you don't let the valve off somehow, it'll come out somewhere else. So I think we've gone and got to go easy on ourselves and make it okay to have those off days.

**Tiffany:** Absolutely. So finally, what resources are available for parents to assist with their mental health? I know you mentioned the hotline or the care line that you have. It'd be great if you could take us through a few more of those resources that are available today, Julie.

**Julie:** So as I said earlier, PANDA runs a national mental health, perinatal mental health helpline, which is available Monday to Friday from 9:00 AM, until 7:30 PM Eastern Standard Time, daylight savings time. You can reach out to our helpline via 13 000 726 306. And if one of our helpline staff members, who are amazing, don't answer your call straight away you can leave a message and we'll get back to you as soon as possible. And usually within 24 hours. The other really good resource that we have available, which was funded through our partnerships is our mental health checklist. So if you go to [panda.org.au](http://panda.org.au), there's a mental health checklist and there's one for expecting moms. So pregnant mums, our mums with babies in the first 12 months of their life. For dads, either within the pregnancy period or in the first 12 months of the baby's life and for carers, so grandparents, family carers.

And it's a 30 question checklist that expose your thoughts, your feelings, your behaviors, and gives you a bit of a rate at the end of the assessment on how you're going and whether or not you would benefit from seeking support either through PANDA or going to your local GP or talking to your child maternal health nurse, or midwife. And it gives you a really good tool, especially if, like we said earlier, you don't have the words to talk about how you're going. And the checklist is a great resource because it's available 24 hours a day. So you can go onto our website and do it day or night. And we have lots of people doing it at 2:00 AM to early hours feeds. And there's also a range of tools and resources on our website that are available that gives you a good understanding of what perinatal mental illness is and some tips and tricks in terms of how to navigate it.

**Tiffany:** That's great. I think the mental health checklist, that's an incredible resource. Wow. Just to be able to jump on and do that any time as well.



Episode 6: Mental Health  
with Julie Borninkhof, the Founder and CEO

**Tiffany:** (cont...) Like you said, if you can't get through or you're outside of that call time to be able to jump online and fill that out and then have a bit of feedback to go through as well, or a bit of a checklist of things that you might have going on. That's just so wonderful. A nine at that call line, that hotlines there is also great. So thank you so much for joining us today Julie, it's been so great to talk about this important topic for all the parents out there. So thanks again.

**Julie:** Thank you, Tiffany. Thanks for the opportunity. As always it's great to talk about the struggles that people have during this period of time and how normal they are.

**Tiffany:** Thanks again, Julie, it's been lovely having you. For more information about mental health or to get support, you can head to [www.panda.org.au](http://www.panda.org.au) or [www.howisdadgoing.org.au](http://www.howisdadgoing.org.au). Take care of yourselves, everyone.