

## My experience of PND

Breastfeeding counsellor Sherry Bevan explains how her experience of PND has helped her work as a practitioner.

Nobody really knows how many women (and men) suffer from postnatal depression (PND). Depending on which article you'll read, it could be anything from one in ten to one in four women. Similarly the research on the causes and the factors that predispose women is inconclusive.

I didn't expect to be depressed. On the face of it, I was the last person I would expect to suffer. I was an energetic, active, hard-working and positive person. Yet PND hit me hard – really hard. Twice. Perhaps I should have seen it coming the second time. Now I know that research suggests I was a prime target: family breakup in my teenage years, traumatic birth experience, feelings of isolation, high stress levels, and previous undiagnosed incidence of depression.

I breastfed both my daughters. I don't know if breastfeeding helped. However it was the one thing that I knew I could do and I knew I was good at. I enjoyed the intimacy between me and my baby during the feed, and it didn't require me to make any decisions or think, at a time when I could hardly function. So perhaps breastfeeding did help me. In my experience as a breastfeeding counsellor, for some women with PND, breastfeeding may exacerbate her negative feelings especially if she has cracked nipples or mastitis, or if she perceives that breastfeeding may be the cause of how she is feeling or coping with her baby.

When I was ill, life was a rollercoaster. I had some very dark days when all I could do was cry. I just wanted to curl up in a dark box. I hurt – physically hurt all over. I was very anxious and very indecisive. I flitted from extreme apathy one day to extreme anger the next. I felt completely out of control and totally isolated despite a loving husband and family. I honestly thought I was going mad. Yet at the same time, I returned to work as a senior IT manager when my daughter was six months old and nobody at work would have guessed. I organised a major cycling event that attracted participants from all over the UK and the continent.

It took me a long time to recover from PND, especially after my first daughter who was born in 2002. Two years went by before I felt normal every day every week. Recovery was quicker after my second daughter, who was born in 2005.

### So how did I come through?

I knew for a long time that I was suffering with PND before I plucked up the courage to admit it and then to ask for help. I was scared and ashamed. I had a really strong need to talk through my experiences and feelings. Talking to my GP who listened and who understood helped me enormously. A Royal College of Midwives survey of 500 women with children aged 0-15 found that 20% had experienced postnatal depression requiring treatment and of these 76% agreed that talking helped them to feel better.<sup>1</sup> For some

### Treatment for PND

In cases of mild or moderate postnatal depression, NICE suggests that self-help strategies, non-directive counselling delivered at home, brief cognitive behavioural therapy or interpersonal psychotherapy should be considered.<sup>2</sup> NICE recommends finding suitable treatment options for women who are breastfeeding, rather than recommending avoidance of breastfeeding. In order to minimise overall risk of harm, any risks from drug treatment should be placed in the context of an individual woman's illness, and drugs should be prescribed cautiously, starting at the lowest effective dose.<sup>2</sup> Exposure to antidepressants through breastfeeding is considered low to very low.<sup>3</sup> An excellent leaflet for parents is available.<sup>4</sup>

### Postnatal groups

NCT postnatal groups enable women to reflect on and discuss the realities of new parenthood in a safe, facilitated group with a trained non-judgmental group leader. The women get acceptance and support from each other as well as from the facilitator. For details go to [www.nct.org.uk/courses/postnatal](http://www.nct.org.uk/courses/postnatal) or email [partnership@nct.org.uk](mailto:partnership@nct.org.uk) about commissioning NCT to deliver courses in your service.

women, contacting NCT's Shared Experiences Helpline could be a life-saver if they do not feel that talking to a friend or health professional is the right option.

Other things that helped included exercise, spending time with other new mothers, time on my own, knowing that others cared, and, for me, anti-depressants. I feel that the training to be a breastfeeding counsellor, and particularly the self-reflection element, has helped me to finally put my PND demons to bed.

### Breastfeeding counselling

As breastfeeding counsellors, many of the women and men who come to us for breastfeeding support are in the very early days of parenthood, and postnatal depression often doesn't strike until a few weeks or even a few months after birth. I know that some mothers who I have supported over a longer period of time have experienced postnatal depression. Those mothers have really valued having the opportunity to talk to somebody who will listen to them without judging, without interrupting, without telling them what to do or think. Which is all that many of us want, isn't it?

### References

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2. National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health. Antenatal and postnatal mental health: clinical management and service guidance. National Clinical Practice Guideline Number 45. London: BPS&RCP. 2007.
3. Berle JO, Spigset O. Antidepressant use during breastfeeding. *Curr.Womens Health Rev* 2011;7(1):28-34.
4. Jones W, The Breastfeeding Network. Antidepressants (postnatal depression) and breastfeeding. Available from: [www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/pdfs/Antidepressants\\_and\\_Breastfeeding\\_March\\_2009.pdf](http://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/pdfs/Antidepressants_and_Breastfeeding_March_2009.pdf)