



Helping mums to avoid becoming the 'Hidden Half'

NCT practitioners and volunteers can make a huge difference for mums experiencing anxiety, depression and other mental health difficulties

By Julie Clayton, Beckie Lang, and Vicky Fobel, NCT

'It's like being in a hole, where you can't get out... I ended up taking an overdose, I was just so helpless... No one really talks about it to you. Or if they do it's 'you're just tired, it will go.' But it doesn't.'

(see [Erin's story](#))

It's common for new mothers to suffer from postnatal mental illness, but an NCT survey of 1,000 women has found that around half of new mothers' mental health problems do not get picked up by a health professional.

NCT has launched the #HiddenHalf campaign to get mental health difficulties out of hiding. The goal of the campaign is to improve the six-week check, which is one of the key opportunities to uncover postnatal mental health

Sadly, there is still stigma around mental illness, and we want to help reduce this by ensuring that practitioners, volunteers and new parents feel comfortable discussing this element of the parenting journey.

problems. It also aims to encourage women in seeking help, with NCT developing resources to support this.

NCT launched the #HiddenHalf campaign in June and within a couple of weeks more than 5000 people had signed up as supporters. The Campaigns Team is planning a set of national and local campaign actions, calling for all new mothers to get a full appointment for the maternal six-week check. Most importantly, this should include a supportive conversation about mental health. You can show your support and hear more about how you can help by signing up at www.nct.org.uk/hiddenhalf

Practitioner action

NCT Practitioner, Jo Powell, has also kindly agreed to coordinate a #HiddenHalf action group, aiming to support local and national initiatives. Jo is looking for people who are interested in joining regional campaigning groups in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to develop targeted lobbying actions, adapted to the individual devolved systems in each of those nations. If you want to know more, please email Jo on joanne.powellnct@gmail.com

Alternatively, if you would like to know more about what the Campaigns Team is planning for the campaign nationally and locally, or have any other questions about the campaign, please email campaigns@nct.org.uk.

New toolkit for practitioners

Meanwhile, with the help of a practitioner-led working group, NCT is starting to develop a new toolkit for practitioners and volunteers to use to help raise awareness in their local communities. This will include an online training module to improve knowledge and skills around maternal mental health, and flyers to distribute to parents about good sources of information and support. In time, it is hoped that short, face-to-face study events will also be developed.

We want to support all practitioners in being confident to talk about the mental health aspects of pregnancy and new parenthood, just as they are about so many of the physical elements experienced at this time. For some practitioners this will already be part of their repertoire and for others this may be new, and possibly daunting. Sadly, there is still stigma around mental illness, and we want to help reduce this by ensuring that practitioners, volunteers, and new parents feel comfortable discussing this element of the parenting journey.

Highlighting that mums and dads can experience mental health difficulties at this time helps to reduce isolation, increase discussions and improve help-seeking. By signposting suitable sources of support and advice, practitioners can make a huge difference to those who may be experiencing difficulties in silence.

It's time to get postnatal mental illness out of hiding

The NCT survey found that among the women who experienced mental health problems during or soon after pregnancy:

- Half (50%) of mothers experienced mental health problems at some time during pregnancy or within the first year of their child's birth.
- Nearly 20% with an emotional or mental health problem did not feel able to disclose it in their six week check.
- Of those who had an emotional problem they didn't disclose at their six week check, a quarter (24%) said there wasn't time and 46% were worried that health professionals would think they weren't capable of looking after their baby.
- 95% of mothers who had a mental health problem said that this had an impact on their ability to cope as a mother or on their family.

We think all new mothers with a mental health problem should get the treatment or support they need. The first step is making sure that they get the problem identified and diagnosed by a health professional.

NCT recommends more funding is made available for the six-week check, so that GPs have the time to give every mother a full appointment, rather than having to maternal mental health training and guidance for doctors so they are better equipped to discuss emotional wellbeing with mothers.

Additional reading

Introducing parents to attachment theory, NCT Perspective, September 2016. Available from: bit.ly/2fKxGIN

NCT practitioners: from strength-to-strength on perinatal mental health. NCT Perspective, September 2016. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2lzqyIF>

Recognising and acting on perinatal mental health. NCT Perspective, September 2016. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2c0TnO9>