

Finding support for postnatal depression

Postnatal depression is both common and debilitating yet sufferers often don't recognise the signs or know where to turn for help, writes Kim Thomas.

Sharon Pontin suffered from postnatal depression (PND) after the birth of both her children, now aged seven and four, and found it an isolating experience. The delivery of her first child was traumatic; the baby had sleeping difficulties and colic. 'Sometimes when you're there', she says, 'you don't think it's ever going to get better, and you don't realise that there is light at the end of the tunnel – you won't always be sleep-deprived, you won't always feel you can't get out of your pyjamas, and there are places to go and people to contact.' Sharon began taking anti-depressants when her first child was a year old and she had stopped breastfeeding, and again after the symptoms returned when her second child was ten months old.

'My issue with PND is that people are too worried about talking about it,' she says. 'You do put on a front. My closest friends know how I am but with people I don't know as well, I don't necessarily talk about it – you almost have an expectation of yourself to get on with things.'

As a result of her experience, Sharon volunteered for NCT's Shared Experiences helpline, which offers telephone peer support to parents. She felt that she would be able to understand the experiences of other women going through PND: 'I just thought that if there are people in the same situation, it's important for them to be able to vent about it and know that other people have been through it and come out the other side.'

Suffering in silence

A report published last year by the charity 4Children suggested that as many as 35,000 women a year in the UK could be suffering from PND but not seeking help.¹ Although one in ten women suffer from the condition after giving birth, the Suffering-in-Silence survey found that 49% of women with symptoms do not seek help. Of this group, 60% did not believe their symptoms were serious enough to warrant treatment, while 33% said they were too scared to tell anyone

because they were afraid of what might happen to themselves or their child.

The report argues that PND is currently a low priority for the health service, and that GPs need to do more to diagnose PND early and offer appropriate treatment. While NICE guidelines stipulate that counselling should be offered to women with a mild or moderate postnatal depression, the 4Children report found that only 41% of women diagnosed with PND were offered talking therapies, while 70% were prescribed antidepressants.^{2,1}

A sympathetic ear

For women who are worried about going to the GP, or who feel the need to talk to a sympathetic listener, NCT's Shared Experiences helpline can help. Callers facing a particular challenge are referred to a parent volunteer who has had personal experience of a similar problem. These peer supporters, some of whom are also qualified NCT practitioners, have all been selected for their suitability and offered training and supervision by NCT. The aim of the helpline is to offer empathetic listening and reduce feelings of isolation. Parents are able to talk through options and are often signposted on to further information or encouraged to see their GP or health visitor.

One caller described why she felt motivated to call:

'I called the line because I was in a really horrible place and I just wanted to talk to somebody who had been there as I couldn't imagine anyone who had been in this situation...It was as though everything I looked at had a grey cloud. Plus, having a young crying baby who wasn't sleeping and the demands that came with a young baby – all those demands made me go downhill. I was finding it difficult to do things like change my baby's nappy – it would take me 10-15 minutes. I hadn't told anybody apart from my husband and my mum.'

She was pleased with the help she received:

'Talking to her [the volunteer] made me feel that I was normal and that I would go back to normal one day. It gave me some hope and I really needed that. I spoke to her once for a really long time, maybe an hour...It was just nice to hear someone say, "I went through that and it's bad but it will get better."

Another caller said that her postnatal depression had got worse while waiting six months for referral to see a counsellor. Her call to the helpline marked a turning-point:

'My husband was becoming very cross with me. Our relationship was becoming very strained and when I contacted the line and read some leaflets about postnatal illness, he read them too and things began to change and he actually thought, "There is a way out of this". I have learnt a lot about myself and I am not as uptight as I was before. The last three or four months have been great for our relationship.'

PND is a complex illness that is underdiagnosed. When left unacknowledged and untreated it causes unnecessary suffering.³ Speaking to someone about how she is feeling may help a woman or her partner work out what steps to take next, such as making a GP appointment, finding out about talking therapies, or seeking specialist help. Shared Experiences Helpline volunteers are trained to listen and they also understand from experience what other parents are going through.

References

1. 4Children. *Suffering in silence: 70,000 reasons why help with postnatal depression has to be better*. London: 4Children; 2011. Available from: <http://www.4children.org.uk/Resources/Detail/Suffering-in-Silence>
2. National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health. *Antenatal and postnatal mental health: clinical management and service guidance. National Clinical Practice Guideline Number 45*. London: The British Psychological Society and The Royal College of Psychiatrists; 2007. Available from: <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/index.jsp?action=byID&o=11004>
3. Tsivos Z, Wittkowski A, Calam R, et al. Postnatal depression - the impact for women and children and interventions to enhance the mother-infant relationship. *Perspective* 2011;(11):16-20. Available from: www.nct.org.uk/professional/research/reviews-evidence

NCT Helpline

Please let parents know that if they want practical and emotional support in all areas of pregnancy, birth and early parenthood including help with feeding, they can call NCT's Helpline on **0300 330 0700**.