



Motherhood floors most women. So why do so many suffer in silence?

Emma Svanberg

Perhaps it's the expectation of perfection, or maybe mothers don't want to open up to health staff. Either way, postnatal depression seems taboo

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You see an interesting phenomenon in a baby group. Groups of smiling women, somehow managing to hold a conversation while keeping small objects out of tiny mouths, feeding a baby and getting it to sleep. They talk about their babies, their partners, the news - but never about how tired they are, how relentless life is, how sometimes they have a secret cry in the bathroom. Among the many women that I've seen for therapy, one thing links them all - their struggles are silent.

A recent US study found that 1 in 5 women who experience postnatal mood problems will not tell their doctor. This will come as no surprise to mums. While we hear more than ever before about pre- and postnatal mental health, most of us are still not seeking help. Indeed, 81% of mothers surveyed in another recent study said they had experienced a problem with their mental health.

There are lots of reasons why a woman might develop a problem with her mental health during or after pregnancy. The perfect storm of biological, physical, psychological and social changes that occur when you have a baby makes some fallout almost inevitable. So why the continued silence?

Although there have been many awareness campaigns in recent years, how often do we talk about mental health in daily life? Instead, being “fine” and “getting on with things” are badges of honour. For mums, this stigma is exacerbated by the fear of what happens if we confess we are not coping - especially if a professional agrees with us. And let’s add in our new bundle of joy. What does it mean about us if we’re not blissfully happy and in love? To top it all off, as modern parents we often exist in a vacuum. In the absence of community support, not only is it more likely that we will struggle, it’s also more likely we’ll think our struggle is normal.

Underlying all this is the myth of the perfect parent. Although we might see this as a modern phenomenon, the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott touched upon it back in the 1950s when he coined the phrase the “good enough mother”. He urged parents to forgive their failings. But our standards just seem to be getting higher. So of course we can’t mention our problems, when we feel that not only should we be coping - but coping while starting a small business, homecooking organic sugar-free meals and perfecting our glutes.

Even if we do mention it - what then? Just as in the US, we have guidelines in the UK to ask mothers about their mental health. Over the years, numerous programmes have been created to help families: specialist health visitors, SureStart, and only last year the Perinatal Community Services Development Fund - but the need is greater. Clear pathways exist for perinatal mental health support and treatment, too. But the problem isn’t just with lack of service provision, it’s also in accessing service. It’s hard to spot a mental health problem when so many of the symptoms are also the symptoms of new motherhood: lack of sleep, lack of appetite and low libido, to name a few. And you may not be likely to disclose them to a harassed health professional in an understaffed service.

Alongside extra funding, we need to see a clear recognition throughout maternity, primary care and mental health services that most women do struggle when they become mothers. If we can tackle the isolated, high-pressure status of new parents by ensuring support is available during pregnancy and after birth, then women may not have as much to hide.

. Dr Emma Svanberg (aka The Mumologist) is a clinical psychologist specialising in pregnancy, birth and parenting. She is currently running the #makebirthbetter social media campaign

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