

Paternal Post Natal Depression



Campaigner Mark Williams shares his story and how he became a campaigner to support Dads with PND.

Disclaimer: The information below is not intended as medical advice and is only intended to offer points you may wish to consider in 'non-emergency situations', together with signposting for more support. You should consult an appropriate medical professional if you have concerns about your levels of anxiety or dial 112 in an emergency if someone is in a life-threatening condition

Before the birth of my son Ethan in 2004 I was living a 'normal' life, working in sales, and 'excited and looking forward to fatherhood'. When my wife Michelle went through a 22-hour labour which ended with an emergency caesarean, everything changed.

It was the first and only time in my life I've ever had a panic attack – I thought my wife and my baby were going to die. I didn't realise it at the time, but after what I'd witnessed on the labour ward, I suffered with PTSD – I was very anxious, I was having nightmares. Then my wife went on to develop very serious postnatal depression. I had to give up work for six months to care for her and my son.

I didn't get this overwhelming feeling of love I was expecting as I was just glad he was alive. I felt guilty and not good enough as a dad, as I thought I should have these feelings.

Like many, I had suffered low self-esteem at school, and lived with undiagnosed ADHD until I was 40. But I had never experienced depression until after my son was born.

PND

I was one of those people who said: “How can you have depression?” I didn’t judge people – but I felt there was always someone worse off. But going through depression, it was like a bubble. I couldn’t talk to anyone about how I was feeling - I was worried what they would think – and I couldn’t tell my wife, because I didn’t want to impact her mental health. I couldn’t tell my friends. I couldn’t tell my family.

My personality totally changed. I was really angry. I remember I punched a sofa and busted up my hand. I would start fights with bouncers – getting punched was another form of self-harm really.

I started having suicidal thoughts when my son was three or four months. I honestly thought they’d be better off without me. I started to think it was my fault my wife had depression. I started drinking late at night as a way of coping – I didn’t know what else to do.

I couldn’t tell my wife as I didn’t want it to impact her own mental health even though I knew how important communication was.

While my wife’s depression started to lift after a year, my moods were changing constantly. I became the best liar – putting on a smiling face all the time. I was masking my emotions.

Five years later in 2010 when, within weeks I lost my grandfather to dementia and my mum was diagnosed with cancer. I suffered a serious breakdown. Looking back, it was the need to be there for my son that stopped me acting on suicidal thoughts. This crisis finally brought me under the care of mental health professionals, and I began treatment.

Reaching Out

A chance encounter during my recovery was the catalyst for my campaigning. I met another father at the gym, whose wife was ill with PND, and who himself had suffered a breakdown.

The realisation that ‘no one had asked how he was doing’ during this time sparked the idea of a support network for dads whose partners had PND. Fathers Reaching Out was born.

Only in speaking to other dads was I finally able to understand my experience and PND. Probably one of the reasons I recovered so quickly was having a chance to speak with other dads who went through a similar thing. I felt better talking about it – and I had a purpose; I channelled all my energy into that.

My aim is simple – to bring about a ‘more holistic approach’, with support in place for both parents to bring about ‘better outcomes’.

Otherwise the result is relationships ending, drink and drugs, overeating, undereating, anger and even violence, when there was none before the baby was born.

Raising Awareness

Education is needed, not just for professionals, but the families as well, they are the ones to see it every day. It's hard enough for men to talk about depression – there is so much stigma around that - let alone postnatal depression.

The questions come: "What's he got to be depressed about? He didn't have the baby." But how I always describe it to friends is, if they had not got pregnant and had a baby, that man wouldn't be depressed – in the first 12 months antenatally that is PND.

Too often, men are excluded from the conversation, in the services and information on offer around the birth of a child. I launched the #HowAreYouDad campaign to encourage healthcare professionals and educate families to ask that question, and look for signs and symptoms.

There's no data, no screening in place, but we know that fathers are taking their own lives due to postnatal depression. Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 50 in this country, they are 47 times more at risk of suicide* than at any other time in their lives but still no one is asking dads about their mental health. There is enough evidence out there now, and more coming out – there are no excuses.

My motivation; what drives me, is that I want to make sure things are in place if my son becomes a father. I want to make sure so no one else goes through what we went through.

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Mark founded International Fathers Mental Health Day in 2016 which is always the day after Father's Day in the UK and has published a book *Daddy blues: postnatal depression and fatherhood*.

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*(Quevedo et al(2011))

External Resources

<https://www.nct.org.uk/life-parent/emotions/postnatal-depression-dads-10-things-you-should-know>

<https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/blogs-and-stories/after-birth/tommys-midwives/postnatal-depression-men>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/postnatal-depression-and-perinatal-mental-health/partners/>

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