AIMS For a better birth...

Perinatal Mental Illness

AIMS Journal, 2013, Vol 25 No 1

Angeline Brunel Dickson writes about her experience with postnatal depression and how this led to a group of women making a film about their experiences

I had been writing about my own experience for approximately six months when I was approached by the Mental Health Network to meet and discuss how we could try to raise awareness and to help make positive changes to services being provided to women in Glasgow and the surrounding areas.

This was the beginning of something really great and we continued to meet each week. We were then advised that the NHS and the Anti Stigma Partnership would be awarding us a sum of money to help us raise awareness in any way that we thought would be effective and beneficial. One member of our small group came up with the idea of making a film about our experiences, an honest account of our feelings about our own individual recovery process. As we had all had different experiences of PND, prenatal depression and support within the Mother and Baby Unit, located at Glasgow Southern General, we felt that it was an account which spoke for a wide range of women and also understood that other cultures and men also experience perinatal mental illnesses.

Once it was decided that we were going to go ahead with the film, we then had to interview production companies, to make sure that our story would be told in a true and honest way and to make sure that our experiences would be felt by those who would be watching, so that they could feel how far we had come in our recovery and also gain insight into the depths of darkness that is felt when going through this illness. We wanted our stories told in a way that could be understood, not for sympathy but for empathy, in order to help others. It is also important to note that we were supported by Elaine Clark and Roch Cantwell from the Mother and baby unit to produce this film.

After going through many different applications from many different companies, and also the interview process, we decided to go with a company called 'Urban Croft', based in Film City in Glasgow. Martyn Robertson and Emma Hagen were able to work with us, gain our trust and take us back to 'that place' safely, and then bring us back again using techniques such as psycho drama - Emma is a qualified psychotherapist. They were understanding, professional and amazing to work with and we couldn't have produced such an amazing piece of work had it not been for them. They captured the feelings and emotions felt by us, supported and understood what we had gone through and why it was so important to deliver the message that we wanted to get across to those watching, whether it be a consultant, GP, midwife, survivor or someone experiencing perinatal mental health issues.

Once we finished the filming, we went through the editing process until we were happy with the final piece of work. We waited for the Scottish Perinatal Mental Health Conference where I was able to present the film on behalf of the group. It was a very nerve-wracking experience but one which I felt proud to do, in order for the audience to see how empowering the experience can be. The film was well received by most and although the odd comment was raised over child protection and other issues, we were not prepared for the amazing amount of support and positivity which came our way. We were inundated with requests to use the DVD in other areas of Glasgow as a teaching aid and also for showing to people who were going through perinatal mental health issues. It also led to the formation of Maws (meaning mothers), a group which were looking at ways to stand alone, to raise awareness and to be the voice of those who were suffering in silence. Unfortunately some members are no longer in the group but we are still working away and the DVD is available on the Mindreel site.

It is important at this point for me to discuss my own journey with perinatal mental health. Some of the questions that I am asked by people currently on their own journeys will give an understanding of what some women go through and how they deal with emotions.

A question that I asked so many times was, 'When will I feel better?' I wanted someone to give me the answer, to give me hope and to tell me when the fuzzy head and feelings of hatred and resentment towards my daughter would stop, but because it is very much an individual thing, no one can answer that. However, some things can certainly help in recovery, and for me those things were exercise, counselling, talking to people about it and also attending groups. What works for one person doesn't always work for someone else but trying different things and accepting help until you find your own way is the key.

You can also talk to understanding health professionals, tell them how you are feeling so that they can try to arrange some options, try not to be scared or ashamed to speak out. Your feelings are valid, they are real and they are justified. Each person recovers in different ways but you will get through this and you will be a survivor.

I also asked myself on many occasions, 'Why am I like this and why is it happening to me?' There are many theories on why we are affected by perinatal mental health issues, from hormones to experiences during pregnancy, to previous depression. I'm not a health professional myself, I can only give an opinion on my own experience, and I don't know why.

Every day I tried to rationalise and come to some sort of conclusion but I couldn't. What I was able to do, though, was accept that it had happened, deal with the emotions ranging from anger to sadness and channel them into getting better. It's like a mourning period of sorts. Mourning for who I was before, dealing with the anger that I wasn't her anymore (or so I thought), coming to terms with the fact that I wouldn't have the same amount of time that I had before and that my body had changed. These were things that gave me guilt, feelings that I was selfish for not appreciating that I had a beautiful child. I realise now that I was taking the messages, primarily from the media, about how life was meant to be after a child was born and how it was meant to be a happy experience.

In reality it isn't always like that. Women are expected to jump back, lose weight, feel normal but in reality our bodies have been through trauma and our hormones have gone through many different stages and phases in nine months. In some cultures a woman is looked after by her community for 40 days, made food, given massage and looked after, but here it is very different and we are expected to get on and deal with our bodies and minds changing with very little support.

Am I a bad parent? PND/PPD/perinatal mental illness chooses you, you do not choose it. I feel that someone who is trying to gain a better understanding in order to help themselves is also a parent who wants to get better in order to be the parent that they want to be. Does that make someone a bad parent then? We are told what is a good parent and what is a bad parent by society, but surely one who loves (which can take a while to come, but that is the illness and not the parent) their child and is looking for help should be the definition of good- enough parenting. We are influenced and pressured by other parents, by the media and by peers as to what a parent should be. Shouldn't love and basic necessities being met be the definition of parent whilst removing the words 'Good' and 'Bad'? I feel personally that those two words carry many other connotations that our minds interpret our own version and we end up adding guilt which is not helpful but harmful.

I am now in my second pregnancy, and I am experiencing hyperemesis for the second time. I do believe that there is a link to PND. I think that there needs to be more research done to explore the links between physical and emotional illnesses in pregnancy and postnatally. I know that I am certainly experiencing signs of both, but due to past experience and being quite proactive, I went to my doctor and told him that I needed to be monitored in this pregnancy and it helps, especially on those days when I am feeling particularly low, to know that I am getting the support that I need. I can't predict the future, but I can access the services and monitor my moods, and I know that because I have got through this once before, I can do it again. It wasn't an ideal time in my life but it has certainly made me really very strong and motivated. I have met some great people, some strong people and some amazing women through this.

Maws - Our Journey can be viewed at http://mindreel.org.uk/video/maws-our-journey-perinatal-mental-health This film has been made as an educational resource for those experiencing perinatal mental health issues and for health care professionals. It follow the Maws journey through their own experiences of perinatal mental health. Exploring personal accounts of perinatal mental ill health, the aim is to encourage shared experiences and better health care support for new mums.