AIMS For a better birth...

Fifteen Minutes on Social Media

AIMS Journal, 2020, Vol 32, No 4

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Editor's note: This article features a fictionalised discussion of one woman's experience of stopping breastfeeding and her feelings of regret about doing so. AIMS knows that there are different views about breastfeeding, and the topic can arouse strong feelings. This article describes one person's perspective, and we recognise that not everyone who has stopped breastfeeding will feel this way. There will be a list of resources at the end of the article that can offer support for anyone experiencing the issues discussed here.



Jennifer Culley with Liz Skidmore

This piece is a fictional conversation on a social media platform but is based on a real experience of a mother struggling with feelings of grief and regret. This format acknowledges the way many parents now access support. It is an example of a closed Facebook group that has a specific goal, in this case, breastfeeding support. There is a large variety of support groups, ranging from those set up by parents wanting to reach out and find informal support within an online community to groups that are run by trained professionals or volunteers who moderate posts and have rules for members to follow. The sort of online peer support modelled in this piece can be beneficial to parents who might otherwise feel isolated and unsure of where to access support or have their voice heard.

Jen: 10.00 - Is anyone there? I need to rant!

Peer supporter Liz: 10.01 - Hey Jen. What's up?

Jen: 10.02 - I've just seen a post on a local parents' Facebook group.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.02 - Go on...

Jen: 10.02 - You see, a new mother was agonising over her decision to stop breastfeeding, and it's reminded me of five years ago when my little girl was a few weeks old. I guess it's brought back some of those emotions.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.03 - I see...

Jen: 10.03 - I had really wanted to breastfeed, but it was so painful. At the time, I didn't know what to do

about it or where to get support. Two friends visited me and shared that they'd struggled to breastfeed too. They described how they'd felt so much better once they stopped and that I shouldn't be putting myself through this pain at such a vulnerable time in my life. At the time, it felt so reassuring to hear that it wasn't just me and that it was ok to stop breastfeeding. In fact, I felt that a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and on that very same day, I went out to buy some formula.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.04 - It sounds like it was reassuring for you at the time, but like you have some regrets now?

Jen: 10.04 - Yeah, I do. I try not to think about it too often, but this post has stirred it up.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.04 - I'm sorry to hear that, it must be hard for you. So this is what you saw on Facebook this morning...people were being supportive of the mother in a similar situation to yours...is that right?

Jen: 10.05 - Yes, but no. All the comments were kind, on the whole they were saying she shouldn't feel bad about stopping breastfeeding. In one way, I agree with this, because no one should make her feel bad, but she might actually end up regretting her decision like I did, and will all those people be there to support her then?

Peer supporter Liz: 10.06 - Mmm...perhaps not.

Jen: 10.06 -That's why I'm feeling so angry. I now look back to that day with those well-meaning friends and wish I hadn't met up with them. If I had searched for a different kind of support, I might not feel the regret I still feel now at having not breastfed my first child for as long as I wanted. Everyone supported me, but I really regret my decision.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.07 - Sounds like you still have strong feelings about not continuing to breastfeed your first baby?

Jen: 10.07 - Yes, I think the fact that I was able to feed my other two children for as long as I wanted almost adds to the regret that I stopped breastfeeding my first so early on. Although I accept that others may not have the same regrets I have, I wonder if it's just me!?

Peer supporter Liz: 10.08 - No, not at all. For many mothers, stopping breastfeeding before they expected to can be devastating. It can result in feelings of grief and prolonged feelings of loss and failure, which are harmful to their emotional wellbeing. There is even some research on it. Here's a link to this research if you want to see it:

bmjopen.bmj.com/content/9/5/e026234[1]

Jen: 10.09 - Thanks for that, that definitely resonates with me. I think my friends and the women on Facebook this morning meant well. Hearing the kind words of other women that have gone through something similar can be validating and empowering, I can see that too, but it still hits a nerve!

Peer supporter Liz: 10.10 - Social media can be a double-edged sword sometimes, can't it? The author of *Informed is Best*, Amy Brown, writes how social media can help reduce people's feelings of depression and anxiety by normalising and discussing these feelings, and by providing an opportunity to ask questions...but it's not always the case that the information shared is evidence-based or shared in a completely objective way. There is often unconscious persuasion hidden in the sympathy and kindness.

Jen: 10.11 - Well, it's reassuring to hear that it's not just an issue I have! I often think about coming off social media, but the benefits seem to outweigh the negatives. I had a homebirth with my third child, and the homebirth group I found on Facebook was so supportive. At the time, I didn't really know anyone that had had a homebirth, so feeling connected to a group of likeminded people made me feel less isolated. It also helped balance out the messages of 'are you allowed' and 'I don't think I could risk it' that I was getting from friends and family.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.12 - It sounds like the sense of community and support you got from that group was really beneficial to you and your home birth experience. Actually, that reminds me of a paper I looked at recently about a closed breastfeeding support group on Facebook. It reflects what you said about the sense of community and support felt by the members. The mothers involved also expressed how the group increased their confidence in their parenting decisions. Here's a link to that:

app.dimensions.ai/details/publication/pub.1079271993[2]

Jen: 10.13 - Thanks, Liz. I found that with the admin-led groups (like the ones on Facebook that are moderated by professionals or volunteers with some level of training), the information seems more reliable as the admins can remove anything that's incorrect or potentially harmful. It's great that if you do something less usual, like a homebirth, there's probably a group of likeminded people out there that you can easily access! Things have changed so much in the last six years. When I had my daughter, I wasn't really aware of these groups.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.14 - You feel you missed out on this when you had your first baby?

Jen: 10.14 - I think they might have helped me access more support. In the Facebook post this morning, there were also a few people sharing some of the support that's available, which was good. Oh, I've just noticed the time! Thanks for being around to chat, Liz, I think I just need to approach social media in a more mindful way.

Peer supporter Liz: 10.15 –

No worries, there's always one of the peer supporters available to chat on this group.

That's a good point: being mindful about how social media can sometimes cause negative thoughts and feelings can help us to take better care of our wellbeing. Just recognising this can enable us to take a step back and consider where these feeling are coming from.

Jen: 10.15 - Have a good week, chat soon no doubt!

Peer supporter Liz: 10.15 - You too, speak soon!

Resources for those in a similar situation

Brown, A (2019) *Informed is best: How to spot fake news about your pregnancy, birth and baby.* London: Pinter & Martin.

Brown, A (2019) *Why breastfeeding grief and trauma matter.* London: Pinter & Martin.

"Five ways to help when breastfeeding doesn't go as expected."www.laleche.org.uk/five-ways-help-breastfeeding-doesnt-go-expected/

Jen works as an Antenatal Teacher and a Breastfeeding Counsellor for NCT. When she's not busy looking after her three young children, Jen volunteers to support local families. Other than all things pregnancy, birth, and parenting, her interests include interior design and living a minimalist lifestyle.

Liz is a mum of 2 young children and has recently qualified as a Breastfeeding Counsellor and Antenatal Teacher with the NCT. She is also a former engineer, and is passionate about making a difference to breastfeeding support locally, as well as supporting families during their transition to parenthood.

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1 Ayton, JE, Tesch, L & Hansen, E (2019) "Women's experiences of ceasing to breastfeed: Australian qualitative study." *BMJ Open* 9:e026234. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-026234

2 Bridges, N (2016) "The faces of breastfeeding support: Experiences of mothers seeking breastfeeding support online." *Breast Feeding Review* 24(1):11–20