Introducing PMH Support

AIMS Journal, 2021, Vol 33, No 3

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Scott Mair is a husband, Veteran, dad to 7 boys and founder of PMH Support[1]: a Facebook page offering guidance and advice and practical tips - educating parents on parental mental health through pregnancy, birth and beyond. He is a member of the Paternal Mental Health alliance, a mental health campaigner, peer to peer leader trained, a team member of the perinatal training CIC and a qualified Beyond Birth mental wellbeing practitioner. He works locally and nationally speaking to expectant parents.



By Scott Mair

My experience of becoming a dad was an absolute rollercoaster - very difficult, anxious pregnancy and traumatic birth, mixed with sheer joy, as we had talked about kids when we were only 16. We got married at 18 and my first son was born when we were 20. From the beginning we knew our future involved children. Even so, I wasn't prepared for how the birth itself would impact me and my mental health. As with many parents, and most definitely dads, it's later on in life that we realise the impact that events have had. It was our seventh son that caused me to hit rock bottom. I found it hard because I knew I was struggling but I didn't have enough education to know what it was. I just had this sad numbness that you hear everybody describing and I wasn't able to connect the dots on what was causing it. I experienced it over about eight years, and at first they put it down to me being in the military and being injured. They just kept giving me antidepressants. And then I realised that all these spirals around my mental health were around the time of pregnancies because of the anxiety of traumas happening. We have had suspected miscarriages, traumatic deliveries, emergencies… everything you can think of, we have experienced it. And not once did anybody think that watching those things is going to affect you. The

births were simultaneously the best and worst days of my life. It can go wrong so quickly, and dad is just standing there in the corner thinking oh my god… and then once it's unfolded you're just supposed to move on.

When I was talking to dads on zoom groups it just kept highlighting the fact that my story wasn't unique. There is this idea that dads don't talk, dads won't share but actually it's that nobody asks. I'm a firm believer that we have to support both parents. We need better postnatal mental health care. 6000 men take their own lives in the UK every year and the statistics say that 1 in 10 new dads will experience postnatal depression[2]. We need a proper pathway for dads to get support and understand what they're experiencing. Society has this idea of what a man should be - men don't cry. And if we do talk - where do we go, how do we get the support? Due to the fact I really struggled to find support or any information, I set up PMH Support.

Most people think I campaign just for Dads. I talk about dads based on my experience, but I push for better support for all parents. The hope is that society and services will see the family as a unit and support it as one, not just as individuals.

All too often, in a situation where you only have the two parents and times get hard, it's just each other that they have to lean on! I know so many of you hear me say this often, but if not for my wife Sarah I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing; in reality without her I wouldn't be here period, and that's not what I think, it's what I know. I also know how much I helped her in times of need. That's what we do as family after all, yet we are continually treated as individuals. Support all parents' mental health; it's not rocket science. It's better for the family and, while some people don't agree, there is evidence to prove it's better for the child's development[3]. So that means everyone has a part to play and family member's views and opinions are important and should be respected, even when they don't fit with society's expectations. And family services, anyone involved with family services has to see the importance of both parents and, in my case, what a father has to offer. His views and opinions, but really those of all non birthing partners, have so much to offer in regards to babies development but crucially in regard to the birthing person. They know them best. Why can't they all see this, a fountain of knowledge left untapped all too often.

We have experienced three extremely traumatic births, with each birth worse than the last. I have never been so scared in my life. The three pregnancies had been straightforward but the births were far from it. It was after the birth of our sixth son, where both my wife and son were at risk of dying during labour, that I lost all control. I stood in the delivery room as it filled with a lot of people before my wife was rushed for an emergency c section. I stood outside the theatre not knowing what was happening. I could hear my wife crying, and doctors saying we need to get this baby out now. I was in the corridor with my head in my hands not knowing if they were going to be ok. After what felt like an eternity, I was allowed into the operating theatre. My son was born and rushed past me as he wasn't crying and needed help to breathe. My heart felt like it stopped. My wife was not well, my son had been rushed away, there was so much going on. Thankfully my son was ok and I was able to see him after about 20 minutes. My wife recovered physically, but mentally she developed PTSD. She received therapy and is now well, but that took a long time.

Our seventh son was born at 36 weeks. This was a planned c-section due to the severity of the 6th birth. We were told that 'any more after six (babies) and Sarah would "die"'. This was the exact way it was put in recovery, then never talked of again or even explained, despite multiple attempts to figure out what happened and why and what it meant, until fifteen months later when baby number seven was discovered! So it was hard to be overly excited early on as my concern for her was matched by her concern for her unborn child!

When our seventh son was born, he needed NICU care as he could not breath on his own and in a short period of time my life seemed to fall apart around me. My wife wasn't well from the minute he was born and for three days I constantly raised my concerns and was told to listen to the experts, but in this woman, I am the expert and everything I knew told me something was very wrong. I questioned and raised concerns, convinced she had an infection! It turned out she had multiple infections and it was sepsis that almost took her from me. If I was listened to, my wife would never have suffered quite like she did. Post c section she was critically ill, but it took 3 days of me being ignored before they listened. I really thought that I might be saying goodbye to the love of my life. That experience broke me in a way I don't think I ever fully recovered from. This is why I started my webpage.

It was only after Sarah recovered that I began to notice things were not right. I was not happy, easily irritated, no patience, avoidance, no tolerance. I could not find joy in anything. I was depressed. I could not understand why; I have my wife and I have my beautiful boys, but these feelings were getting worse. I was at breaking point; I could not go on. My wife recognised something wasn't right but it was my health visitor who told me what I could be experiencing and suggested speaking to someone. I went to see a private counsellor where I was diagnosed with PTSD. It was found that it had been there since the birth of my first son 18 years ago and the fear and anxiety had carried over to the next pregnancy until it became all too much. The breaking point was attributed to witnessing or experiencing a life threatening event. Well let me tell you now - nothing is more traumatic than thinking your wife and or child might die! The thought that I might be saying goodbye to the love of my life, while knowing my son was fighting for his life on another ward, broke me in a way I still can't fully articulate and in a way I will never fully

recover from. Time isn't a healer. It's how you use the time, and what you learn over time, that helps most - not just the time itself.

So rather than being bitter, the PMH Support page gave me a way to try and help others. I'm no Mary Seacole or Florence Nightingale, but I did manage, as so many on here did, to find a bit of peace in helping others and by giving the advice I wish someone had given me. I felt we needed to have conversations that we just don't have about the realities of pregnancy, birth and parenting, as it's hard, really really hard. We can love being a parent and adore our children but still find it challenging. We have 7 boys and I'm still trying to figure it out day by day. Nobody has it sussed in my mind. Some may say they do, but trust me they don't! The best thing you can ever do can also be the hardest - it can be both; it's not one or the other. If we had these conversations more frequently and openly we would see that everyone struggles at some point. Nobody said life was easy, so it's ok to find it hard!

Scott and his PMH support can also be found on his instagram page.
https://www.instagram.com/p_m_h_support/

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[1] PMH Support: https://www.facebook.com/pmhsupportforparents/

[2] Tommys (2017) Postnatal depression in men. Available at: https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/blogs-and-stories/after-birth/tommys-midwives/postnatal-depression-men

[3] National Research Council (US) and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Depression, Parenting Practices, and the Healthy Development of Children; England MJ, Sim LJ, editors.

Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2009