

Perinatal emotional and mental wellbeing

Summary

This questionnaire with 1438 respondents was an undertaking by UKPEA. UKPEA (www.ukpea.org) is a new charity focused on the 1001 first critical days, from conception to two years old. We will be supporting families throughout the UK during this time through our peer to peer community classes, our social media campaigns and our CPD courses for maternity professionals. We are focused on strong emotional and mental wellbeing for all members of the family.

Our recent research is addressing the very real national problem of low mood and anxiety in pregnancy and after birth, and ways in which women can be supported and protected from this. We will also be teaching parents, families and communities how the fetus' environmental factors influence their own physical, emotional and social development, one example of this being the baby sharing the mother's hormones - whether this be the happy love hormone, oxytocin, or the stress hormone cortisol. Acting upon this understanding and early bonding in pregnancy will allow the baby to develop in the most optimal way, and also ensure stronger family connections early on. We are also committed to supporting the exceptionally important role of the father/partner and their emotional and mental wellbeing too.

This questionnaire's primary focus is that of perinatal emotional and mental wellbeing. It is a very open questionnaire, with most of the questions looking at the emotional and mental wellbeing of mums in the whole perinatal period, throughout pregnancy and after the birth of their baby.

The survey was spread throughout facebook and then via twitter. It was initially distributed via a variety of different facebook pages focussed on parenting or pregnancy, and also selling pages of baby items and wider family groups. The survey was then spread further a field by respondents, but from the initial placing of the survey throughout pages we can be confident that a wide variety of women had access to this survey.

It can also be presumed that perhaps women who had suffered from perinatal emotional and mental poor wellbeing might be more inclined to answer a survey on this topic. The overall statistic of 45% of women feeling their emotional and mental wellbeing was not as good as they wanted might not be indicative of the population at large.

Section One

Perinatal Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

1438 women from the UK answered this survey for the UKPEA on emotional and mental wellbeing throughout the perinatal period. This survey is part of a group of surveys to really ascertain a deep understanding of the thoughts, wants and needs of families in the 1001 first critical days of life. As discussed previously this was a very open survey to allow very open answers. The majority of questions were not specific to either the antenatal or postnatal period, but applied to both. Women were asked what they experienced in this period in relation to their emotional and mental wellbeing, and what helped them, again throughout this whole period. Question 21, however, was specific to just the antenatal period in asking what women would do to change their pregnancy if given the option.

This survey was distributed throughout social media in a wide variety of Facebook groups, ranging from groups focused on different parenting styles, to selling pages of baby items, to wider family groups. The survey was then further spread by some respondents and could then no longer be tracked as to the groups it was being advertised in. We are confident that from the outset the survey was reaching a wide range of women with a rich variety of views and life experiences.

Of the 1438 women who answered this survey, 45% reported that their emotional and mental wellbeing at during pregnancy and after birth was not as they would have wanted. Women who were struggling or had struggled were more likely to answer a survey regarding this matter, so it is not to say that this is an accurate percentage of the women nationally that experience low mood or anxiety perinatally.

More women than this 45% answered the questions on what helped them during pregnancy and having a newborn and also on what they would have done differently. It is obvious that even if women were reporting to have been 'fine' during this time there are still things to be done differently and still areas were they needed to "feel better". The wide variety of answers that these questions gave were very interesting and provides all with a better understanding of the support and care that is needed to create happier pregnancies, births and new, and growing, families.

It is very worthy of note that 9% of the women who answered this survey said that their choices in whether to have another baby or not were determined by fear and/or birth trauma.

Women were asked how their current mental health was currently and then how it had been during pregnancy, birth and after birth. The difference was that 18% of women reported feeling worse in pregnancy or as a Mum to a new baby. Interestingly 4% reported feeling mentally and emotionally stronger in pregnancy.

There is obviously a big difference in asking women how women were feeling at the time they answered the survey, and how they were feeling throughout their entire pregnancy and the time with their newborn. The important thing to take from this is how women perceived their feelings. Almost half of the women who answered perceived that they struggled with their emotional and mental wellbeing during pregnancy and after birth.

How women were affected

The survey then went on to ask women if their emotional and mental wellbeing was not all they wanted, how did it affect them. 45% of the women answered this question, less than the 52% indicated in the previous questions. This was a very open question not focussing on either antenatal or postnatal experiences but just allowing women to express how they felt in this perinatal period.

The comments of the women who responded to this question are very heartfelt and show the need there is to help and support women struggling with emotional and mental poor health in pregnancy and postnatally.

The vast majority of women did not just answer with one idea, many giving very detailed answers with a wide variety of effects.

Perhaps surprisingly was the sheer volume of women (45%) who reported having problems with their anger, with the majority of these women stating that they had experienced sudden outbursts of anger during this time. Women went on to explore how these anger feelings made them feel, with some of the women saying that they felt they were a bad mother/friend/partner because of this.

Nearly half of the women who reported feeling worse than they would have liked reported feelings of depression, with 112 of these women (8% of all respondents) describing their depression as severe.

Women reported feelings of heightened nerves and anxiety, problems with their partners, trouble sleeping, lack of happiness, guilt, feeling as if they were a "bad mother", expectations not met, concern of how they would cope as a mother and more.

172/647 women reported feeling isolated or lonely with more than half this number referring to the lack of support, care or compassion from professionals. 139/647 wanted more support than they received, with midwives, GPs, partners, friends and parents mentioned as lacking in support. 185 women wanted to be told that these feelings were normal, again mentioning professionals in this and 114 women wished that someone had recognised how they were feeling, midwives being mentioned in particular.

40% of these 647 women and 18% of all the women who took part in the survey, referred to their employment as a negative influence on their emotional and mental wellbeing through pregnancy and returning from maternity leave

The effects of Hyperemesis Gravidarum were referred to be 19% of the women who answered this question, a surprisingly large amount. These women spoke at length at the very real mental and emotional stress that this pregnancy 'symptom' placed upon them.

10% of women reported their existing mental health being worsened during pregnancy and as a new mother.

3% of all women who answer revealed that their emotional and mental health had reached such a low point that they considered suicide.

Support

When women were asked who they felt supported by, 1180 women answered, showing that clearly all women need support through the perinatal period not just those struggling. Women answered identifying all the people that had offered them support; whilst 3% of these 1180 women stated that there was no support offered to them, many women felt supported in some degree by their partners, family, friends and professionals – ranging from 57% to 86%. This question was not noting who offered support but who women felt supported by. This is not to say that 86% of women were helped completely but important that they did in some way feel supported.

961 of 1438 respondents shared what helped them emotionally and mentally during pregnancy and after the birth of their baby. As previously stated this is more than the 632 in question 10 that indicated their wellbeing was not all they wanted it to be.

All help is important so all the help that was noted in the answers to this survey are reported in this report. 961 women gave the things that helped them; these ranged from eating biscuits to going to Mother and Baby units. All these things of help should be celebrated in giving relief to mums, however they were experiencing this time.

These women's answers were able to be put into 13 categories, the most important listed below.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP	697/961
PROFESSIONALS	324/961
COMMUNICATION	398/961
PREPARATION	312/961

When women were asked from a list of options what they benefitted from specifically 47% women stated that they benefitted from relaxation, with 72% saying they benefitted from extra cuddles with their partner. Pilates, yoga, ante-natal swimming classes and reflexology all proved to be more something mums wished they had done than actually did; perhaps an area that needs more publicity for mums.

What would you change?

1117 women answered the question on what they would have redone in their pregnancy. Women spoke freely about how they would 'redo' their pregnancy, what they would do differently. The answers can certainly be read as potential advice to other Mums of what to do in pregnancy.

Its interesting to note the very high number of women who said they would want to bond with their baby earlier in pregnancy; it should, however, be noted that this question was posed after a section on antenatal bonding. It might be that the thoughts of antenatal bonding were placed at the forefront of women's minds but no persuasion was used so the desire for early bonding is real in these women.

1117 women of the 1438 women answered the question. The answers range from simpler things like drinking less coffee to deeper issues such as reaching out for help earlier or being truthful about how low they were feeling. The section on 'Different approaches to medical professionals' is particularly interesting, when compared with the ways in which medical professionals were listed as one of the main reasons women felt better in question 14.

The most tragic element in this questionnaire is that 8 women when asked what they would 'redo' in their pregnancy said that they would have a termination. These women could have answered the survey on a particularly dark day so these view points might have only been fleeting but regardless that is the depth of feeling of those women.

312 women of these 1117 wished they had spoken openly about their feelings, 219 women said they wished they had enjoyed their pregnancy more with another 213 women stating that they wished they had started bonding with their baby earlier. 204 women wished they had known it was normal to have these feelings and that they were okay.

177 women commented that they would have changed their interactions with professionals, less than the earlier shown 341 women who felt that their emotional and mental wellbeing was improved by the support and care from medical professionals.

Other things that women wished they had changed were their eating habits, their working life, antenatal classes, asking for practical help, screening tests in pregnancy and their wish to seek help earlier.

Conclusion

All women need to know that low mood and anxiety is common place in pregnancy and after birth, all family members need to know this and also how to support their women through this time. Women need to not feel alone.

All medical professionals need to ensure that all their interactions with women are compassionate and with care. We have seen the great difference in

the effect that interactions' with professionals can have on women, being both highly positive and highly negative.

Women need more awareness of the things that can lift their mood, more information on pregnancy, birth and having a baby, and more overall preparation and control over their pregnancy and birth.

Women need awareness of early bonding and how it can be achieved and the very strong benefits it can have on Mum, baby, Dad, partner and the wider family if wanted.

The UKPEA endeavours to ensure all these things happen through its education services, its campaigns and CPD for professionals

Section Two

Antenatal bonding

In Section two we look at aspects of antenatal bonding. We asked at what point Mum recognised baby as a little person, at what point she saw herself as a Mother, her partner as a Father etc.

The understanding of the importance of antenatal bonding is becoming more widespread with recent studies suggesting a link between feelings of closeness to the baby antenatally and postnatal wellbeing including experiencing less postnatal depression (Goecke, 2012).

It is for this reason and others that the UKPEA wish to encourage and educate families about the importance of antenatal bonding and care.

We asked women about the connection felt with baby during pregnancy and reasons for this lack of connection if there was a lack. Lastly, in this section women were asked how they spent their bonding time with their baby, and if there were any other ways they used as bonding.

The question at what point did you see your baby as a little person was an interesting one for anyone studying this time in a women's lives.

51% of women felt that they did not recognise their baby as a 'little person' before 30 weeks, with 31% of women feeling this way until the baby was born or after.

Earlier bonding was one of the main topics that women would want to do if they could 'redo' their pregnancy.

Of the 1154 who answered the question at what point did you recognise yourself as a Mother, 784 women (68%) did not recognise themselves as a Mother till 30 weeks onwards of pregnancy, with 692 of 1154 (60%) not recognising themselves as a Mother till birth or later.

Of these 692 women 437 had previously said that their mental and emotional wellbeing were not all they wanted it to be during pregnancy and after the birth of their child.

724 women (62%) said that they felt a connection with their baby during pregnancy – the timing of this connection was not discussed.

Whilst 17% of women (194/1159) said they did not feel a connection another 21% of women (241/1159) women said that they were unsure if they felt a connection with their baby during pregnancy. 297 of these 435 women also mentioned that they did not feel recognise themselves as a Mother until birth or later.

The next question was then aimed at the 435 women who did not feel a bond or were not sure if they felt a bond with their baby during pregnancy.

323 women chose to answer this question, 112 women of the 425 chose not to.

44% of these women (143/323) said that they did not want to bond with their baby for fear of something going wrong, whilst 7% of these women said they couldn't bond with baby due to their ill health.

17% of the women felt that their baby didn't need anything till they were born.

27% of women stated that the reasons they did not bond with their baby for 'other' reasons, ranging from "I didn't know I was supposed to" to 'external life pressures'.

Conclusion:

213 of 1154 when asked what they would redo in pregnancy said that they would want to bond with their baby earlier in their pregnancy. This is certainly an area that women are interested in but with little information. 12% of the 961 women who commented on what helped improve their emotional and mental wellbeing mentioned focusing on their baby during pregnancy helped them.

Of the women who said they didn't connect with their baby during pregnancy or that they weren't sure 27% of the 323 women referred to not realising that they were supposed to connect with their baby before birth.

As referred to earlier there are increasing links between the bond with baby and feelings of emotional and mental wellbeing.

This survey has certainly showed a need for education for women regarding the benefits of early bonding for Mother, baby, partner and family.

UKPEA has this very intention in its mission statement to educate and develop antenatal bonding within families. To educate families regarding how

the fetus' environmental factors influence their own physical, emotional and social development. Acting upon this understanding and early bonding in pregnancy will allow the baby to develop in the most optimal way, and also ensure stronger family connections early on and perhaps improve Mother's emotional and mental wellbeing.

Youtube videos:

To make some of the answers more accessible two videos were made.

A video presenting the results of some of our research on 'perinatal emotional and mental wellbeing'. Looking at the answers of the question: "If your emotional and mental wellbeing was not as good as you would have liked, could you describe how it affected you?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgSEJw19X2M>

A video showing the results of the question: "What did you find helped you emotionally and mentally during this time?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBnO55o8dLE>

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