

MumsAid: An organisation that meets the challenges of postnatal depression

MumsAid is a non-profit organisation providing free counselling for women experiencing mental or emotional difficulties in pregnancy or after having a baby. Founder and director, Miriam Donaghy, discusses the successes MumsAid has had throughout its first year.

MumsAid is a non-profit organisation that offers free perinatal and postnatal counselling to women who live in the Royal Borough of Greenwich. The service is provided in Brookhill, Storkway Mulgrave, and Robert Owen Children's Centres. Each centre serves quite a different demographic, and because of their geographical spread, MumsAid are able to offer reasonable access to perinatal counselling for most of the residents.

The director and founder of MumsAid, Miriam Donaghy, is a psychotherapist with more than 14 years experience of specialising in perinatal support. Before setting up MumsAid, Miriam managed parenting projects for both Greenwich Mind and the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR). Miriam was also responsible for developing and overseeing services that provided support to new mothers, as well as

training in postnatal depression awareness for other professionals.

As a result of this experience, Miriam was determined that MumsAid would offer a pragmatic, solution-focused model of therapy, and most importantly, the organisation would provide a flexible approach adapted to best suit the individual needs of the mother and her baby.

The counselling offered by MumsAid is available to women who are either pregnant or have children under the age of 2 years, and those who feel that they would benefit from emotional support. The service is currently provided by four counsellors or psychotherapists. Three of these work as volunteers, and all have specialist training, experience and a professional interest in working with perinatal mood disorders.

MumsAid offers up to 12 sessions of counselling, initially on a weekly basis, but these may be further spaced as the therapy progresses. The sessions are based on interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), which is reported to be effective, particularly for life transitions, and is also recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2009) guidelines for the treatment of mild to moderate postnatal depression. The MumsAid therapists have a broad range of skills,

including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) (effective for post-traumatic stress disorder), and parent-infant psychotherapy. They are all able to deal with the wide range of problems that may occur during pregnancy and in the postnatal period.

The service is family friendly and aims to be accessible to anyone who needs it. Free crèche support is available, but if preferred, mothers can also be seen with their babies. Referrals are accepted from professionals, such as health visitors, midwives and GPs, but self-referrals are also welcome.

Themes and clinical issues

MumsAid has been established since May 2012 (although it developed from a freelance postnatal counselling service that had been running since April 2011). To date, MumsAid has helped 35 families, and many of the women who have attended the counselling service could be described as having multiple or complex needs. So, while for some mothers there has been classic postnatal depression difficulties, such as anxiety, agoraphobia, depression because of a bereavement during pregnancy, a traumatic birth experience, or a lack of confidence about their ability to look after the baby; for others



Miriam Donaghy, Director and Founder of MumsAid
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» *The right support makes a difference, not just to mothers, but also to the healthy emotional development of their babies, and this is why MumsAid are committed to sustaining and developing the services they offer.* «

Case Study

Belinda was referred by a telephone counsellor at Greenwich Mind who felt that she would benefit from counselling specific to her struggles in adjusting to becoming a mother. Belinda was 36-years-old and a first time mum. Before having her first baby, she had been successful in her career as a journalist. However, Belinda had endured a difficult childhood with a violent and volatile father that had left her prone to bouts of depression and anxiety. The anxiety and panic attacks that she had experienced in the past became crippling after she had her baby. She was frightened to be alone with her daughter and terrified to leave the house on her own. She was unable to drive and could not cope with the day-to-day tasks required to look after herself and her daughter. Her GP had referred her to the community mental health team and a social services assessment. She had been prescribed anti-depressants and given the Mindline number which she had been phoning regularly whenever she was on her own. As well as severe anxiety, Belinda had ambivalent feelings about her baby. These were expressed when completing the questions about bonding in the pre-service questionnaire. Belinda had already suffered a miscarriage, which had been a traumatic experience that she had not really recovered from, and just a few months later she found herself pregnant again. She had wanted a boy and fantasised that the lost baby had been a boy, whereas her baby was a girl. Belinda had felt too guilty to share these thoughts with anyone and found having a safe place to do so in counselling provided a huge relief. Belinda attended all the sessions except one, owing to her baby being unwell. She made great progress, and managed to overcome her anxiety and begun to live a normal life. By the end of the counselling, she reported that her social anxiety had all but disappeared and as she became less anxious and able to feel more in control, she also became less depressed.

based practice, which is currently a work in progress.

Miriam, director and founder said:

'We are really pleased with the progress so far, but we know from a recent national survey that less than half of women who experience postnatal depression seek help, so there is a long way to go to make the support we offer available to any mother who needs it.'

MumsAid are committed to removing any barriers which may prevent women seeking help by challenging the stigma that often surrounds postnatal depression and by raising awareness. They aim to offer more training to other professionals, including health visitors, about perinatal mood disorders. MumsAid want to reach out to those who might not be currently involved in using any services, this is why as well as a user friendly website with downloadable referral forms, MumsAid have begun to embrace social media with a facebook page and a twitter account.

Miriam believes that the right support makes a difference, not just to mothers, but also to the healthy emotional development of their babies, and this is why MumsAid are committed to sustaining and developing the services they offer. **JHV**

For further information about MumsAid, visit their website at www.mums-aid.org, like their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pages/MumsAid, or follow them on Twitter @mums_aid

References

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2009) Depression: The treatment and management of depression in adults. <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG90NICEguideline.pdf> (accessed 5 April 2013)

there has been problems because of previous mental health difficulties, such as eating disorders, a history of drug and alcohol abuse, hospitalisation for psychiatric difficulties, and experiences of childhood and sexual abuse. In addition, some mothers were also experiencing relationship problems, immigration issues, poverty and homelessness, fears about their baby being removed, and grieving previous losses of children.

Achievements

The most recent evaluation from December 2012 showed that the service provided by the MumsAid counsellors has been effective in improving perinatal mental health, as well as increasing confidence in parenting ability, and enabling mothers who

needed to improve the bond with their baby. Service user feedback and referrers feedback was highly positive.

MumsAid are delighted that despite being such a new organisation, its achievements have already received external recognition. Miriam won an award from Greenwich Action for Voluntary Services in the category: 'Significant contribution by an individual for improving the lives of women with postnatal depression' at the 2012 voluntary and community sector awards. MumsAid were also recognised by the Centre for Excellent Outcomes (C4EO), as an example of 'Promising Practice for Early Intervention'. Since then, C4EO has encouraged MumsAid to submit follow-up data of client outcomes to achieve full status as an evidenced

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