

Aberlour Briefing for Members' Business Debate: The Everyone's Business Campaign

17th May 2018

Key Messages

Perinatal mental health issues are estimated to affect up to 1 in 5 women during pregnancy and postnatally.

Whole family support is essential to ensure mums are appropriately supported during and beyond the perinatal period, and to recognise the supportive role of fathers, partners and other key people in a mum's life.

Support for mums at the earliest stage of a child's life can be key in mitigating the likelihood of children experiencing mental health issues throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Comprehensively addressing perinatal mental illness will insist upon greater collaboration and sharing across sectors.

Aberlour Perinatal Befriending Support

Pregnancy and the birth of a baby is exciting but exhausting and no new mum can feel completely in control in a whirlwind of sleepless nights and new worries. For many parents, however, that exhilarating joy of bringing a new life into the world can be submerged in a terrible flood of anxiety, stress and depression. Around 1 in 5 women will experience perinatal mental health concerns¹.

At Aberlour, we believe in early intervention and we think there is no earlier intervention than perinatal mental health support. We know that not all children are born with an equal chance. Through the work of our perinatal services we aim to give babies a brighter future by building confidence in their parents.

Since 2014 Aberlour has been providing perinatal support services across Forth Valley, and this year we will expand our provision to support mums and their families in East Lothian. Aberlour's perinatal befriending support services provide intensive community-based one-to-one support throughout pregnancy and during the first year of a child's life². Through matching each mum with a befriender

¹ <https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/patients/information/maternalmental-healthwomens-voices.pdf>

² <https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/aberlour/2017/03/31153713/Perinatal-Befriending-Support-Service-An-Evaluation-of-the-Pilot-Delivery.pdf>

the service aims to improve mental health and wellbeing, increase confidence in parenting, reduce social isolation and support access to wider community supports and resources.

Aberlour's experience of providing perinatal support has ensured an insight and understanding of the challenges facing expectant and new mums experiencing perinatal mental illness. Whilst we recognise that health services need to be alert to, identify and address perinatal mental illness as early as possible, it is our experience that greater support should also be available which focuses on the impact of perinatal mental illness on the family as a whole. We also believe that acknowledging the importance of the father, partner or any other existing supportive relationships in the lives of expectant or new mums experiencing perinatal mental illness is essential in ensuring the provision of services and support which draw on the strengths of such key existing relationships. Understanding that perinatal mental illness is not experienced by expectant or new mums in isolation, as well as ensuring access to wider family support services designed to support the whole family through the challenges around perinatal mental illness, is crucial to ensuring that appropriate perinatal mental health services and support are in place.

We believe that addressing the mental health concerns of mums and their babies at the earliest possible stage can have a real impact on the likelihood of those children experiencing further issues around mental health in the future. The correlation between poverty and inequality and the long term mental health outcomes of children and young people from our most disadvantaged communities is well evidenced³, as is the increased likelihood of social isolation and poor educational attainment. We believe ensuring the universal provision of perinatal support is available to all women during pregnancy can help to reduce the probability of such issues in the future, by addressing mental health issues at the earliest opportunity and before the worst effects impact on mums and their children.

We believe there is still much further to go to highlight and create awareness of the issue of perinatal mental illness, as well as to provide the necessary support to those mums and families affected right across Scotland. We know that more work needs to be done working in partnership across local government, the health and third sectors, including adult mental health services, midwifery, primary care, children's services, community support services and CAMHS, to continue to highlight this issue, and to provide the kind of community-based family support which we can now show is both so important and so effective in helping mums and families affected by perinatal mental illness. Recognising that perinatal mental health is **everyone's business** is essential if as a society we are going to ensure that Scotland is the best place in the World to grow up.

For any further information please email Martin Canavan, Policy & Participation Officer
Martin.Canavan@aberlour.org.uk

³ <file:///C:/Users/canavm/Downloads/Poverty%20and%20Mental%20Health.pdf>

Jill's Story

"Before I got pregnant, I was an IT professional with a stressful job. I had always suffered from depression, due to things that had happened in my childhood. I had a nervous breakdown and gave up work. As I started to get better, my partner and I made the decision to have a child. I got pregnant quite quickly. I decided to have the baby before I thought about returning to work.



"My pregnancy was quite difficult. I had a few bleeds and was rushed into hospital, and I thought I'd lost him a few times. As a result, I felt constantly terrified. My mum bought me a pregnancy diary and I didn't write one word in it. I thought that if I put pen to paper that I would lose him and I didn't want to document anything just in case. I was scared right up until I saw him. But he was perfect when he was born and arrived on his due date.

"I was discharged from the hospital after 4 days. But I ended up with a womb infection and had to return within 24 hours, with a fever and blood clots. I was in and out for 3 weeks. It was a stressful time. On top of this, my relationship with my partner was starting to break down. I started to feel very isolated.

"My baby was fantastic though. Once we got home, I was happy, in a little bubble. But then, all of a sudden, every day became the same. You find yourself in a routine of looking after your baby, up day and night, trying to sleep. I started to feel suffocated and I didn't have any time for myself.

"My family were as supportive as they could be. But people tend to let you down. I didn't tell them how I was really feeling. I didn't feel like I had any control of the situation I was in. My life was dictated by the baby. He was breastfed exclusively and hungry every 10 minutes. I wasn't allowed to do anything and I just felt trapped. I had been on anti-depressants but had to cut down on them through the pregnancy. When you've had depression and anxiety, you are more susceptible to post-natal depression I think. I felt low, very low. Like I didn't know how I was going to go on. I didn't think I could cope any longer. And lonely, so incredibly lonely. I was so lost.

"I was worried that people would think I was a bad mum or that social work would take my baby away from me. There were times where I just wanted to escape. But when you have a baby, you have to stay at home. I had to look after the baby. I wanted to look after him but I also just really wanted to get away.

"I had built up a trusting relationship with my health visitor and when my baby was four months old, she started to see me go downhill when I made the decision to leave my partner. She was supportive and suggested that the Aberlour Perinatal Befriending Service might help me. I wasn't sure it was going to help but I thought I may as well try it.

"When I first met Catherine from the service, I'd already tried mindfulness apps, medication, counselling... I thought "how can a fake friendship help with somebody I didn't know help me?" But I just thought "I'll try anything here, anything and everything". Catherine said "I know who you are going to get paired with, I've got the perfect person." So I got matched pretty quickly, no time to think about it or panic!

“My first meeting with my befriender was like an awkward first date. We made small talk and it felt a bit weird. But she was nice, and asked me questions so I quickly thought, “ok, I can hang out with you”. We talked about books and films and she was good with my son. Over time, I built up trust in her.

“It took a bit of time for me to really open up. I wouldn’t go deep about how I felt or tell her the darkest thoughts. Once we’d seen each other for about a month, I started to feel really comfortable. If I had a bit of a blip, I could tell her “things haven’t been going so well this week”. When I approached her with what was going wrong, she responded in a way that made me want to open up more. There were times when she arrived and I was in tears, and I was laughing by the time she left.

“Mostly she came over to the house, but a few times we went for walks. Or she took the baby for a walk and gave me a chance to sort things out. I was in a lot of debt and my finances had got on top of me. I had a list of phone calls to make and the baby was being noisy. Having Sarah there meant I could get some peace and quiet.

“There was one time when there were baby grows all over the place and I was feeling overwhelmed. She helped me lay them out and organise them into piles. It was good fun and just having someone to help and chat to while I was doing it was nice.

“Another time, I was interested in a group that met up to talk about baby weening and real nappies and I wanted to go, but I had never had the courage to go by myself. So my befriender came along with me for the first meeting, then I was able to go on my own after that. I went to Hartbeeps with the baby, and breastfeeding group there were like-minded mums there. We went swimming sometimes too. When I had down days I wouldn’t go out, but I was trying as much as possible, as I wanted my son to interact with other babies.

“It was all about him. I thought, “how can I make him more comfortable, happy, socialised?” Having Sarah come around was a reminder that I had to think about myself. I had totally forgotten about looking after myself. I wasn’t showering, or brushing my hair, or making any effort whatsoever. Now I’ll put my make up on and do stuff for myself. That’s all just come from my befriending.

“I gradually started to feel better. It was little steps. Sarah would encourage me. She would help me get little parts organised. She stopped me from going “what am I’m going to do with all this” She would say, “right this week why not try to sort this one thing or that one thing?” I was getting so much done, and things were falling into place.

“For me, the regularity was important. I could feel myself falling back into the black hole, but knowing she was coming within a few days stopped me falling in too deep. She would bring me back up, bring me out of it, and make me see the positives. As I’ve come closer to the end of the befriending, I’ve learned the tools to deal with this myself. I can feel myself going downhill, but I’m strong enough to pull myself out of it. It’s all about confidence.

“Having a befriender also had a massive effect on my son. Sarah commented that she could see a big difference in him – since I had started becoming more confident it just seems to be rubbing off on him. It’s been fantastic, it’s had a great effect on us both.

“I don’t think I would be alive if it wasn’t for Aberlour’s Perinatal Befriending service. My son is 13 months now and I’m thinking about going back to work. I’ve just signed up to be a befriender with

Aberlour. That will get me out of the house and give me confidence before go back to work. I've got my last meeting with Sarah soon and I've realised there's a lot I can give back. Hearing other women's experiences with depression and anxiety touched me and I thought "I need to be part of this".

"I think the befriending service is amazing. You don't feel alone. You're taken out of that loneliness, it's like someone is holding your hand. It's unbelievable – I've done counselling and all kinds of different things and nothing has had as positive an impact on me as this.

"I had a bad day a few days ago, when my son saw a stranger and thought he was his daddy. My son doesn't see my ex-partner very often, so he doesn't really know him. It cut deep. I could see it affecting my son as he was cuddling this man. It was the father of another toddler at the group, and he gave him a cuddle back, which my son was clearly needing. It made me feel so low. That night I put my son to bed, sat up for an hour and thought to myself, "I'm going to have these moments, they are going to happen and to keep my son happy I'm going to have to keep myself happy. To do the best for my son, I have to look after myself, that's all I can do." And thanks to Sarah and Aberlour's Perinatal Befriending Support Service, I know I can do it now."