Spotlight on maternal mental health: a prepandemic and postpandemic priority

Liz Bailey,1 Kerry Gaskin2

Annually in May, there is a spotlight on maternal mental health (MMH) globally. In the UK, MMH awareness week is coordinated by the perinatal mental health partnership (@PMHPUK) (3 May 2021 to 9 May 2021); while in the USA, ‘The Blue Dot Project’ uses a blue dot as a symbol for unity and awareness for those living with mental health (MH) conditions. This annual focus enables professionals, stakeholders and individuals to raise awareness and influence policy on this critical issue. Evidenced based nursing will be supporting MMH Awareness week by publishing a series of blogs representing a range of views during May 2021.

Perinatal mental health (PMH) encompasses any MH condition affecting people during pregnancy and in the first year after having a baby. This includes conditions ranging from mild depression and anxiety to psychosis; pre-existing MH and MH recurrence during pregnancy. PMH conditions can be pregnancy specific such as tokophobia (fear of childbirth), or postpartum traumatic stress disorder; or be more generalised, and range in the degree to which they can impact on quality of life. In general, PMH conditions affect 10–20% of pregnancies, although reported prevalence rates differ by classification and severity of disease.

Those with mild to moderate PMH conditions may self-manage using strategies such as journaling and mindfulness. Techniques to prepare for labour, such as hypnobirthing may have an impact on anxiety fear. Medical treatment must be considered in parallel with individual medical history and decision-making should happen in partnership with a PMH specialist. Access to specialist services is essential; in 2015 a task force highlighted gaps in service provision across the UK. Following investment, services improved supported by training. There is a need for extra vigilance as we remain in and recover from the pandemic. Maternal suicide remains the leading cause of direct deaths occurring in the year after the end of pregnancy, with psychiatric illness (including drugs and alcohol related deaths) being the fourth overall cause of death after cardiac, thrombosis and neurological causes. Several recently published papers report similar results of online surveys undertaken during the lockdown in various countries.

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