



# Perinatal mental health in a breastfeeding woman: Why can she not breastfeed as normal if she needs medication?

Wendy Jones PhD MRPharmS

The Breastfeeding Network Drugs in Breastmilk Service

## BACKGROUND

Of calls to the Breastfeeding Network Drugs in Breastmilk Service, 15-20% are from mothers with perinatal mental health issues – predominantly anxiety and depression. Frequently they are told that they can't be treated unless they stop breastfeeding. This adds to their distress. The evidence base shows it is not necessary.

## AIM

To identify the experiences of mothers who have mental health difficulties during lactation.

## OBJECTIVES

- To look at the experiences of mothers who had mental health difficulties during breastfeeding.
- To determine what advice mothers are given with respect to mental health and breastfeeding.
- To explore what advice mothers were given with respect to the use of medication for mental health during lactation.
- To evaluate whether the evidence supports the advice given.

## METHODS

- A survey monkey was distributed via the Breastfeeding Network and Breastfeeding and Medication Facebook pages where on average 30 mothers a day seek support for breastfeeding whilst taking medication.
- Questions were designed to provide a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data.
- Short time scale (3 weeks) used to focus responses.

## RESULTS

A total of **801** responses were received with **84.4%** reporting a mental health issue whilst they were breastfeeding. Of these, **32%** said they had issues but never sought help.

Of respondents, **21%** said that the support received for mental health issues did not value breastfeeding and its importance for them. Although **77%** said they didn't stop breastfeeding because of medication, analysis of free text responses showed this was often because they refused medication or sought information other than that from the GP (BfN were named as trusted source).

## SUMMARY OF MOTHER'S COMMENTS

There are recurrent themes of:

- feeling that their breastfeeding is dismissed as unimportant by professionals
- concerns about passage of drug to baby
- Time delay to access CBT
- Difficulties with breastfeeding making depression and anxiety worse
- Concerns on long term effect of medication on babies
- Finding that breastfeeding is the only part of their life they feel good about
- Mothers are scared about their parenting being judged

## EFFECT OF BREASTFEEDING ON MENTAL HEALTH

- Free text comments in this survey fell into 3 categories:
- That breastfeeding helped their mental health.
  - That breastfeeding contributed to mental health issues of depression and anxiety.
  - That mothers had difficulty sourcing evidence rather than anecdote and opinion.

## THE EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH

- Rates of depression are lower in breastfeeding mothers than in their non breastfeeding counterparts Kendall-Tackett K. Depression in New Mothers: Causes, Consequences and Treatment Alternatives Praeclarus Press 2016
- Depressive symptomatology in the postpartum period negatively influences infant-feeding outcomes Dennis C, McQueen. The Relationship Between Infant-Feeding Outcomes and Postpartum Depression: A Qualitative Systematic Review. Pediatrics Apr 2009, 123 (4) e736-e751.
- Results underline the importance of providing expert breastfeeding support to women who want to breastfeed; but also, of providing compassionate support for women who had intended to breastfeed, but who find themselves unable to: Borra C, Iacovou M, Sevilla A. New evidence on breastfeeding and postpartum depression: the importance of understanding women's intentions. Maternal Child Health J. 2015 Apr; 19(4): 897-907

*"I possibly breastfed for longer - it felt like one of the few things I was getting right as a mother."*

*"I kept breastfeeding due to my anxieties, breastfeeding was a way to keep my little one safe in my mind or I would have failed her."*

*"My mental health issues played a significant role in stopping. Once I decided to stop my mental health issues got significantly worse."*

*"Actually made breastfeeding more important to me."*

*"I think my inability to breastfeed caused the PND."*

*"I strongly believe that breastfeeding has been a protective factor which has prevented PND."*

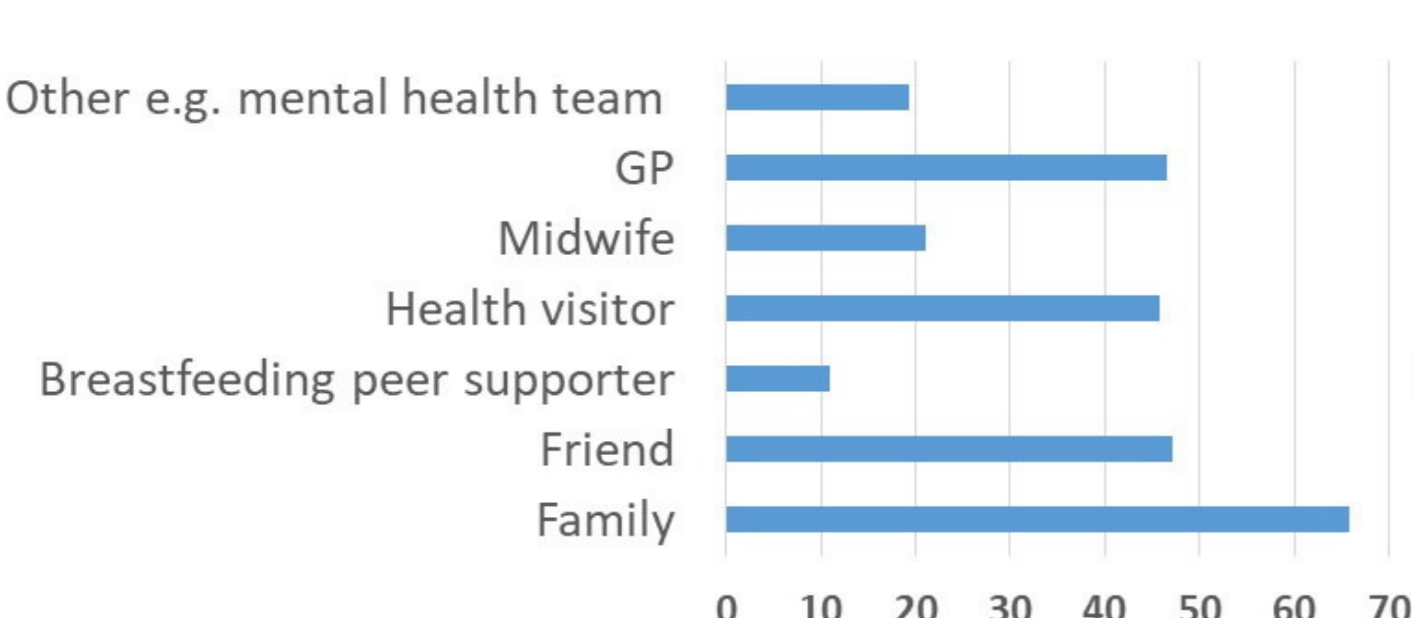
*"Breastfeeding had a positive impact on my mental health, helping me with sleep & anxiety."*

## CONCLUSION

- Mothers are:
- being advised to stop breastfeeding
- delaying treatment or not seeking medical help as they are concerned about the response from professionals
- frightened of being labelled as not good mothers if they have mental health issues

- Early expert support for breastfeeding for those who choose it is important
- Healthcare professionals need training on breastfeeding, the safety of drugs in breastmilk and sensitivity to the needs of mothers around infant feeding
- It is possible to breastfeed and have effective treatment for medical issues (including depression and anxiety) but expert sources need to be consulted (NICE PH11 2008).

WHO DID YOU DISCUSS YOUR MENTAL HEALTH WITH?



CONDITIONS REPORTED BY MOTHERS

