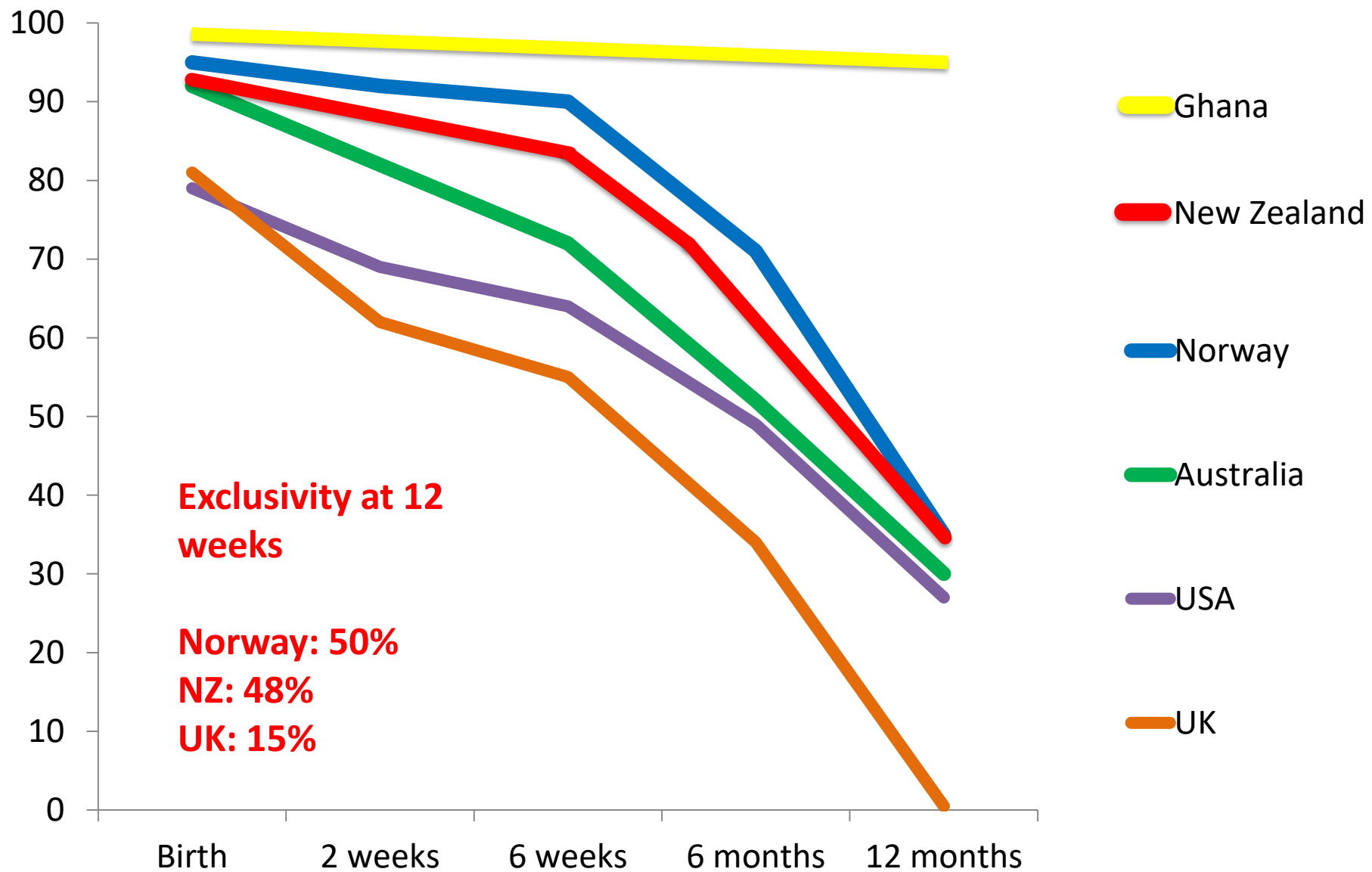


**How can we change
the conversation to
help women who have
not been able to meet
their breastfeeding
goals?**

**Professor Amy Brown
Swansea University**





Adapted from data in Victora, C. G., Bahl, R., Barros, A. J., França, G. V., Horton, S., Krusevec, J., ... & Group, T. L. B. S. (2016). Breastfeeding in the 21st century: epidemiology, mechanisms, and lifelong effect. The Lancet, 387(10017), 475-490.

Parents 'face too much guilt over breastfeeding and work'

Thought those breastfeeding bullies had gone away? They're nastier than ever and attacking struggling mothers

Don't bully new mums on feeding

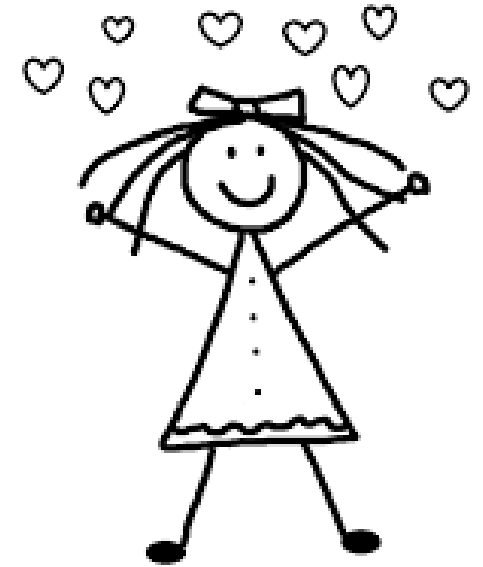
Breastfeeding guidance makes mothers feel guilty: research

Mothers are left feeling guilty, stressed and anxious by 'unrealistic' guidance which says they should exclusively breastfeed for six months, researchers have suggested.

Breastfeeding protects mothers' mental health. Successful breastfeeding is associated with lower risk of Postnatal Depression (PND), improved confidence and lower anxiety

However ...

Experiencing breastfeeding difficulties, or stopping before they are ready, is associated with increased risk of PND, anxiety, and feelings of grief and loss



That's going to leave a scar.



Breastfeeding helps protect mothers physically

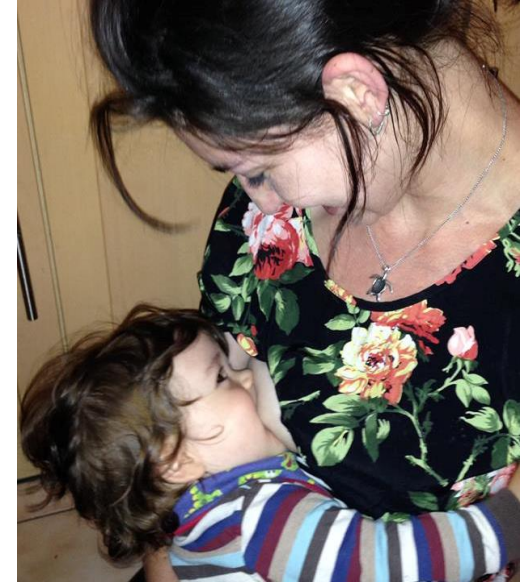
- Body doing what it 'expects'?
- Hormonal protection
- Reduced inflammation in response to stress

- More sleep
- Increased sleep – for baby
- Ease of getting to sleep for mother

Rudzik AE et al. (2018). *Sleep medicine*. 2018 Sep 1;49:90-8.

Engler A et al (2012). *European journal of pediatrics*, 171(4), 729-732.

Blyton, D et al. (2002). *Journal of sleep research*, 11(4), 297-303.



Breastfeeding difficulties increase risk of depression

- Pain & difficulty
- Feeds are likely to be longer
- More difficult than believed
- Feelings of loss at stopping
- Pain can lead to depression



Depression can affect breastfeeding success

- Worries about medication
- Planning for others to be more involved in care of baby
- Impact of increased anxiety
- Interactions with baby
- Everything feels more challenging

Brown A et al. *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*. 2011, 1;24(2):177-86.

Gonidakis F et al. *Comprehensive psychiatry*. 2008 Jun 30;49(3):275-82.

Bigelow A et al. *JOGNN*. 2012 May 1;41(3):369-82.



Why wouldn't loss of bodily function have a negative impact?

- Breastfeeding protects maternal health
- Breastfeeding is a reproductive right
- They want their body to work in the way they expect

Breastfeeding isn't just about the baby – women's bodies matter too

March 11, 2019 3:50pm GMT



Breastfeeding is not something women simply choose to do, it is an instinct, a biological imperative. Tomsickova Tatyana/Shutterstock

Chowdhury R et al. Breastfeeding and maternal health outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Acta paediatrica. 2015 Dec;104:96-113.

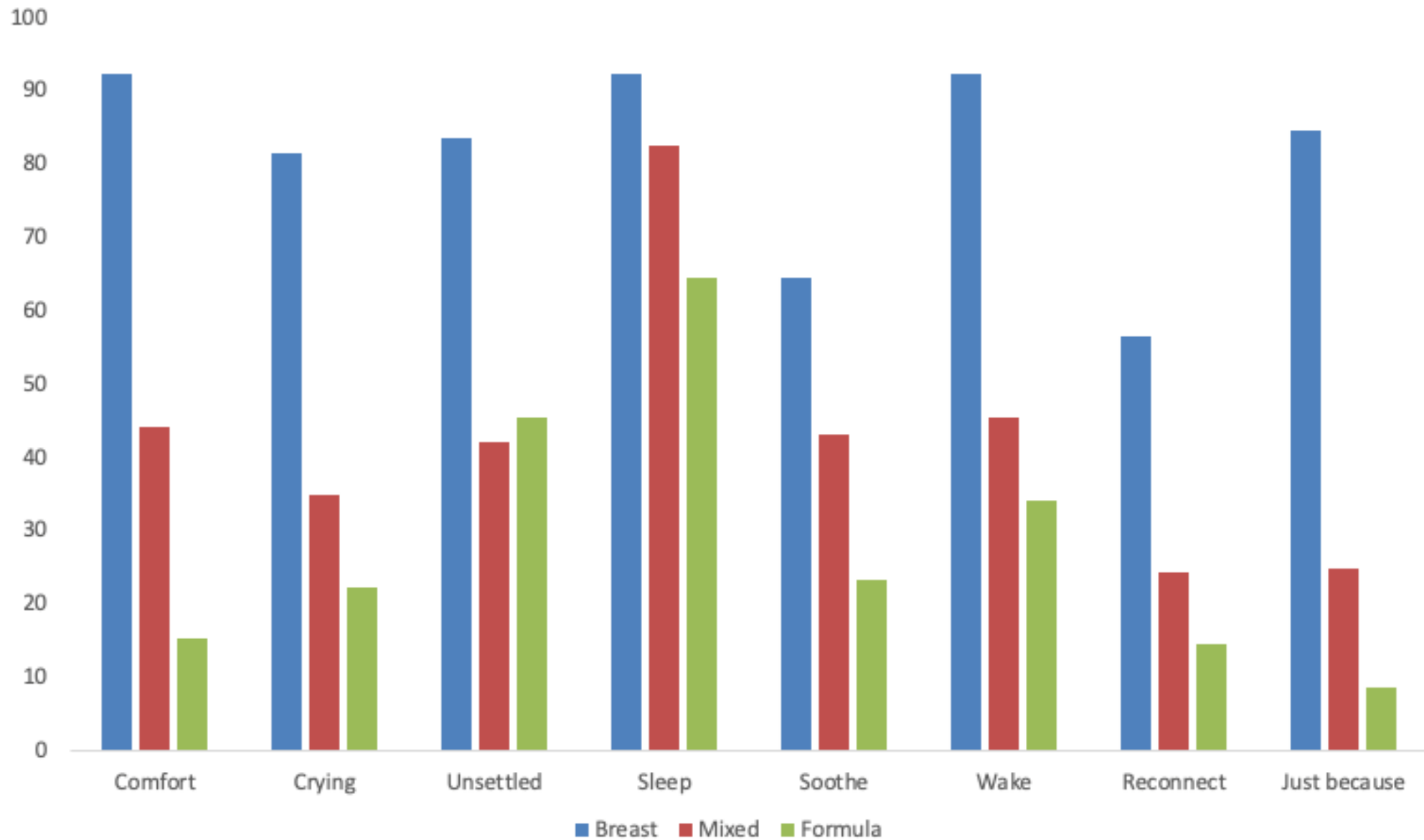
Breastfeeding is a way of mothering

- Convenience
- Impact on finances
- Identity as a mother – especially for premature babies
- Way of caring and soothing

Brown, A. (2018). What Do Women Lose if They Are Prevented From Meeting Their Breastfeeding Goals?. *Clinical Lactation*, 9(4), 200-207.



Reasons for giving a feed



Breastfeeding can help women heal

- From a difficult birth
- If their baby is unwell
- From previous physical trauma
- Body image

I remember hating my body since I was about 4 and feeling like I needed to punish myself through punishing it. My main thoughts about my body were all about how I was going to binge and purge and hurt it (and alternatively try to starve it). When my daughter was born I didn't really mean to breastfeed but thought I would give her a feed and something in me just clicked. I was using my body in a positive way and she was literally thriving in front of me, growing bigger and stronger. She was such a happy baby and I wonder if it helped connect everything. I'm not fully healed and not sure I ever will be, but my experience of breastfeeding her helped me to start seeing my body in a different more powerful and useful way.

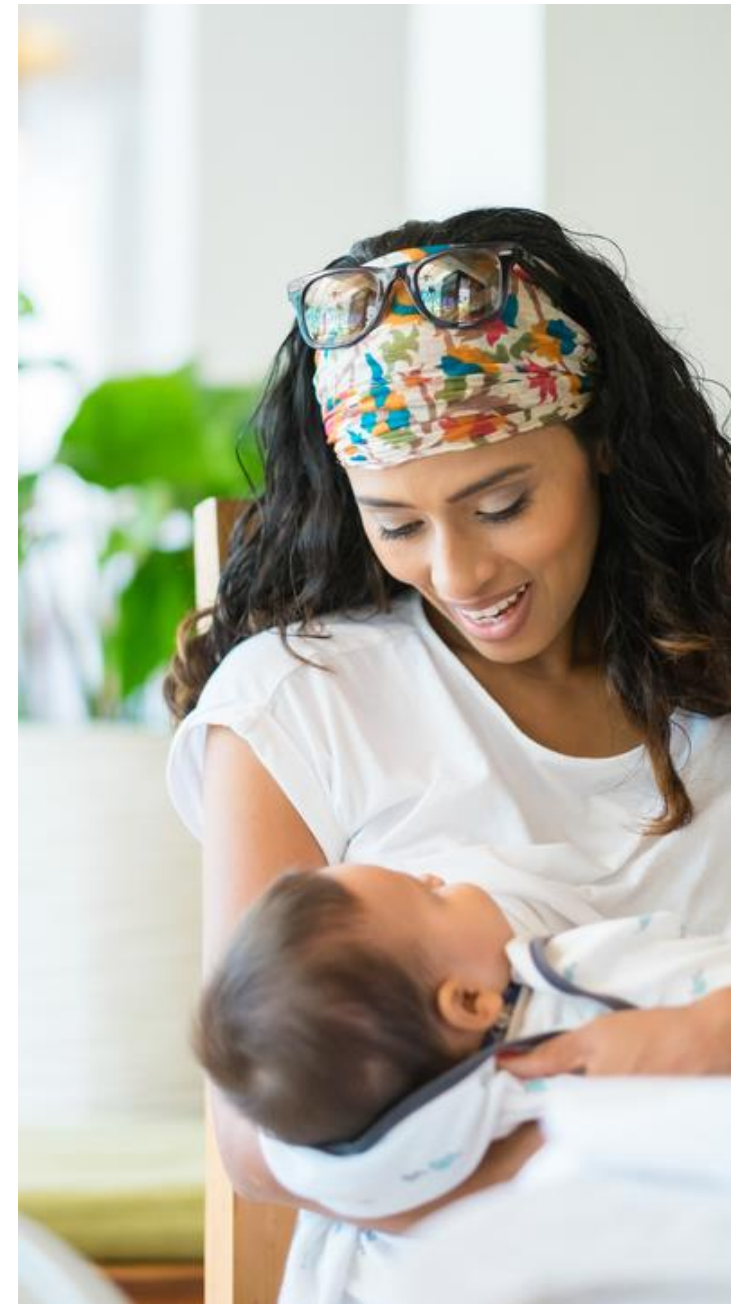
Religious and cultural reasons

- In Hinduism, the primary sacred texts have many references to breast milk, the breast and wet nursing, all referred to in a context of bringing longevity. Breast milk is life-giving – for example when the God Shiva creates Parvati a baby boy out of her dress, he only comes to life when she puts him to her breast.
- In Islam, there is specific reference in the Koran to breastfeeding for two years. Breastmilk belongs to the baby – it is a gift from God and seen to be passing the mothers wealth onto the baby.



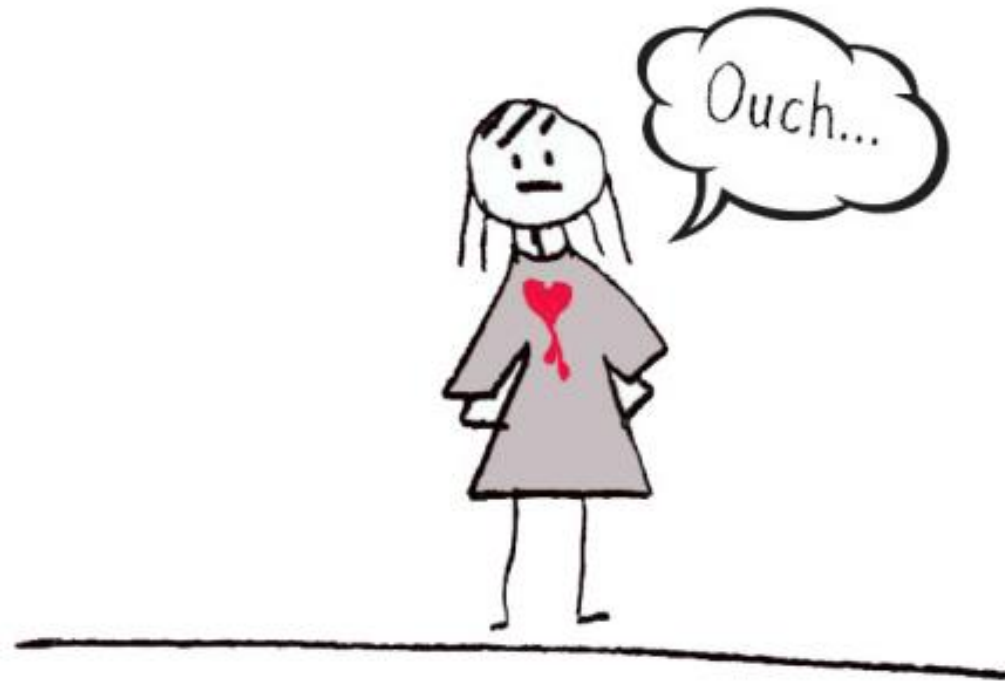
‘Black breastfeeding is a revolutionary act, an act of resistance in and of itself. When black women breastfeed, they are reversing narratives, reclaiming traditions that were taken from them, countering stereotypes and re-establishing the infant feeding norm in our communities. For black women, breastfeeding creates sisterhood and community as we develop peer models of support where larger systems have failed us’.

Kimberly Seals Allers



**How did you
feel when you
couldn't
breastfeed for
as long as you
wanted to?**

That's going to leave a scar.



Guilt
Failure
Shame
Inadequate
Defeated
Regret
Embarrassed
Useless
Less of a mother

Sadness
Heartbroken
Awful
Hideous
Loss
Grief
Devastated
Robbed
Traumatised

Helpless
Out of control
Vulnerable
Overwhelmed
Exhausted
Fragile
Lost

Let down
Gutted
Failed by my body
Failed by system
Hurt
Disappointed
Dissatisfied

Angry
Frustrated
Annoyed

Jealous
Envious
Bitter

Shocked
Confused
Unprepared
Misled

Anxious
Worried
Scared

**Who are your
negative
emotions
directed
towards?**

**Who do you
blame?**



Myself

'It's all directed at myself that I wasn't good enough / didn't do enough'

Health professionals

'I feel anger towards the midwives and health visitors who didn't or couldn't help us'

Advocates

'I feel anger towards people who talk about breastfeeding because they make people feel like lesser parents'

Family / friends

'I feel my husband should have supported me better. If I'd had his support, then I wouldn't feel like this'

My body

'I feel ashamed that my body doesn't work like it should do'

Women who can

'I feel so jealous of women who are able to'

The system

'Fury that there is not enough support or money for breastfeeding'

The media

'I despise the media for trying to whip up negative emotions just to get more money'

Formula industry

'I blame the formula industry for pushing their products and twisting facts'

The Universe

'I blame mother nature for choosing me to experience this'

My baby

'I hate myself for it, but I hated my baby. Why couldn't she do it like the other babies?'

Grief is a normal reaction to loss

- Labbok – breastfeeding grief
- Demonstrating different stages of grief
- But what about more complicated grief?
- Persistent complex bereavement disorder

It really did feel like a loss. I was mourning what should have been the bonding experience I had been promised.

It wasn't until I gave myself a chance to properly grieve what had happened that I felt better

‘I was completely emotionally destroyed by the experience. I spent months in a very black hole. I always saw myself as a breastfeeding mother and wanted to do it for so many reasons, but I barely produced any milk. I was so shocked by that for a long time. How dare my body let me down like that? Did it not realise how important this was to me?’

‘I hate myself and think I am not a good enough mother. Nothing anyone says or does can change the fact I failed.’

DSM-V: Criteria B: Intrusion symptoms

*Intrusive thoughts; Nightmares; Flashbacks;
Distress after reminders; Physiological reactions*

When I read articles that go on about how great breastfeeding is, I'm right back in those awful, dark days with him screaming for hours and hours a day.

If I hear about another mum talking about how much she struggled, I get flashbacks to those hideous, guilt wrenched days even though she's five years old now.

Criteria C: Avoidance

*Avoidance of trauma related thoughts or feelings;
external reminders*

I can't read anything about breastfeeding or babies in general. It's too traumatic still. I am a bit better now, but went through a phase where I even needed to avoid the baby aisle in the supermarket as it would trigger how I felt or put me on edge for the rest of the day without realising why.

My best friend had a baby and it was so difficult to go see her. I am utterly ashamed that I did what I could to avoid her when she was breastfeeding but now she's stopped I see her far more. I wish I had told her why but I couldn't and I worry our friendship will always be that little bit damaged because of how I feel.

Criteria D: negative alterations in cognitions and mood

Inability to recall key features of event ; Overly negative thoughts about self; Exaggerated blame of self or others ; Decrease interest in activities; Feeling isolated; Shame; Guilt

I despise the GP who failed to diagnose my son's tongue tie. I really think it's all his fault and there should be consequences. I reported him but nothing has been done. Why is it fair I feel this way when he feels nothing?

I'm struggling as I was a big advocate in my community. I've been pretending I'm too busy with three children now but really it's because I can't bring myself to talk about breastfeeding and see other mothers who are able to.

Criterion E: alterations in arousal & reactivity

Irritability; Destructive behaviour; Hypervigilance; Difficulty concentrating; Difficulty sleeping

I do everything I can to avoid breastfeeding to the point of excluding potentially great new friendships. I even do things like scan their social media to see if they post breastfeeding articles or belong to groups. If they do, I hide them from my wall.

Everything has been affected. I've lost sleep over this after something has reminded me how awful I felt.

Criteria F: Duration

Symptoms last more than one month

Youngest baby = 3 weeks old

Oldest 'baby' = 36 years old

Criterion G: Functional significance

Symptoms create distress or functional impairment (e.g., social, occupational)

I'm a midwife and am dreading returning to work as how am I meant to support new mothers now?

I try to avoid seeing friends who are particularly breastfeeding happy. I know it's not healthy to do this, but it stops me from getting upset and should only last a while. I think they know what I'm doing, and though they understand, it doesn't seem to stop them talking about how wonderful they find breastfeeding.

**We must stop
underestimating the impact
not being able to
breastfeed can have on
women's
mental health**



We must not invalidate emotions

‘I actually feel better when someone tells me they understand how I feel and how, if I had followed my instincts and not topped up, she would have probably been fine. I feel really angry and have to bite my tongue when people tell me ‘fed is best’ as of course it’s better than starving my baby, but nowhere near as good as breast.’

‘I think a big part of my pain is from people trying hard to comfort me with comments like ‘fed is best’. That didn't help and it made me feel like my feelings were invalid. All I wanted was for people to listen and acknowledge my struggle without outside opinions or advice – unless explicitly asked for.’

What can we do to help mothers who are hurting, grieving or traumatised ?

A lot of hurt came from how women felt they were viewed and treated, rather than simply the loss of not being able to breastfeed.



1) Better support for breastfeeding

Identification of difficulties - more support

More research and answers

Professional training

Better preparation



Expectations and preparation

‘It was all so positive. Breast is best for your baby. Breastfeeding will help you lose weight. Breastfeeding is a wonderful experience. Perhaps all true, but in no way the whole picture. When I then found it difficult, and at times demanding, and my baby appeared to want to scream rather than feed serenely, I felt like a complete failure and embarrassed and guilty that I felt that way to boot.’



‘Just make sure mothers-to-be know exactly any single problem that can happen when trying to breastfeed and how to react quickly. It’s easier to do this when pregnant than with a hungry baby crying next to a zombie mum in desperation. Did I know what thrush, mastitis, tongue tie was before having a baby? Not a clue! Did I attend a breastfeeding workshop? Yes! So why hide all that information? It’s outrageous!’

Stop saying breastfeeding is easy

‘When I attended my antenatal classes, it was drummed into us that breastfeeding was easy, however by far it is not at the beginning. I really think new mums should be aware of this and know that it’s normal to run into problems, but to know the support is there if needed.’



Focus on what was achieved

‘I didn’t breastfeed my first baby because he wouldn’t latch on. I tried again with my second and had lots of difficulties again, but this time I managed to feed him for 7 weeks. I felt really pleased with myself, but every time I told someone this they started sympathizing with me, telling me it didn’t matter that I had given up and lots of women struggled. I ended up feeling really bad.’



2) Be careful in our language

‘Why does the government think telling women something is best is in any way helpful? I know it’s best, but it misses the point that I AM trying my best.’

‘I hate the language of choice. It is often very much not a choice.’

‘I want to throttle anyone who uses the word ‘failed’ when talking about a mother.’



‘Talk about the real risks rather than saying 5 times more likely. Five times what? That might just mean you have just a 5% risk, or, in other words, a 95% chance that your baby still won’t get it.’



Promote breastfeeding without criticising formula

‘There is no need to keep making comparisons where formula is the devil. Promote the power of breast milk without saying it is superior to formula.’

‘Breast milk is ideal for babies and is dynamic, so it’s very special, but when it is not available, then formula is adequate. I felt like I was better starving my baby than giving formula initially. This was an awful feeling.’



<https://globalnews.ca/news/4947697/formula-no-thanks-poster-peel/>

3) Recognise the emotions that not being able to breastfeed can bring

‘I think every mum who stops breastfeeding should be offered a debrief of some kind with someone who understands and knows how they are feeling.’

‘I am a strong believer that breastmilk is best, but breastfeeding isn’t always. Feeding is important but so is a mother who has it together. Recognise that sometimes a mum has to make a difficult decision when it comes to feeding that might seem wrong but actually is the right one for her family.’



4) Consider how mothers who formula feed are supported

‘More support for mums who aren’t breastfeeding. I feel like its only the breastfeeding mums who get support and the bottle / formula feeding mums are forgotten / ignored and made to feel like they are doing something wrong. There are lactation consultants for breastfeeding mums but who do formula feeding mums go to for support and help?’



More information on mixed feeding

‘The lack of support and information around mixed feeding alienates a lot of women. If mixed feeding was more supported as an option, I’m sure women would carry on.’

‘Supplementing doesn’t need to be the end of breastfeeding. If mums need to supplement, let them know they can continue breastfeeding and support them to keep their supply up.’



More feeding support groups

‘Offer more support networks for bottle feeding mums, too. In my area, there are breastfeeding groups that I used to enjoy going to, but once I started bottle feeding, I felt isolated. There were no other free groups to attend.’

‘Lots of important things are often ignored if you are formula feeding. All parents need to know about responsive feeding, holding your baby, skin to skin, looking at feeding cues. These things often get forgotten or mixed up with breastfeeding.’

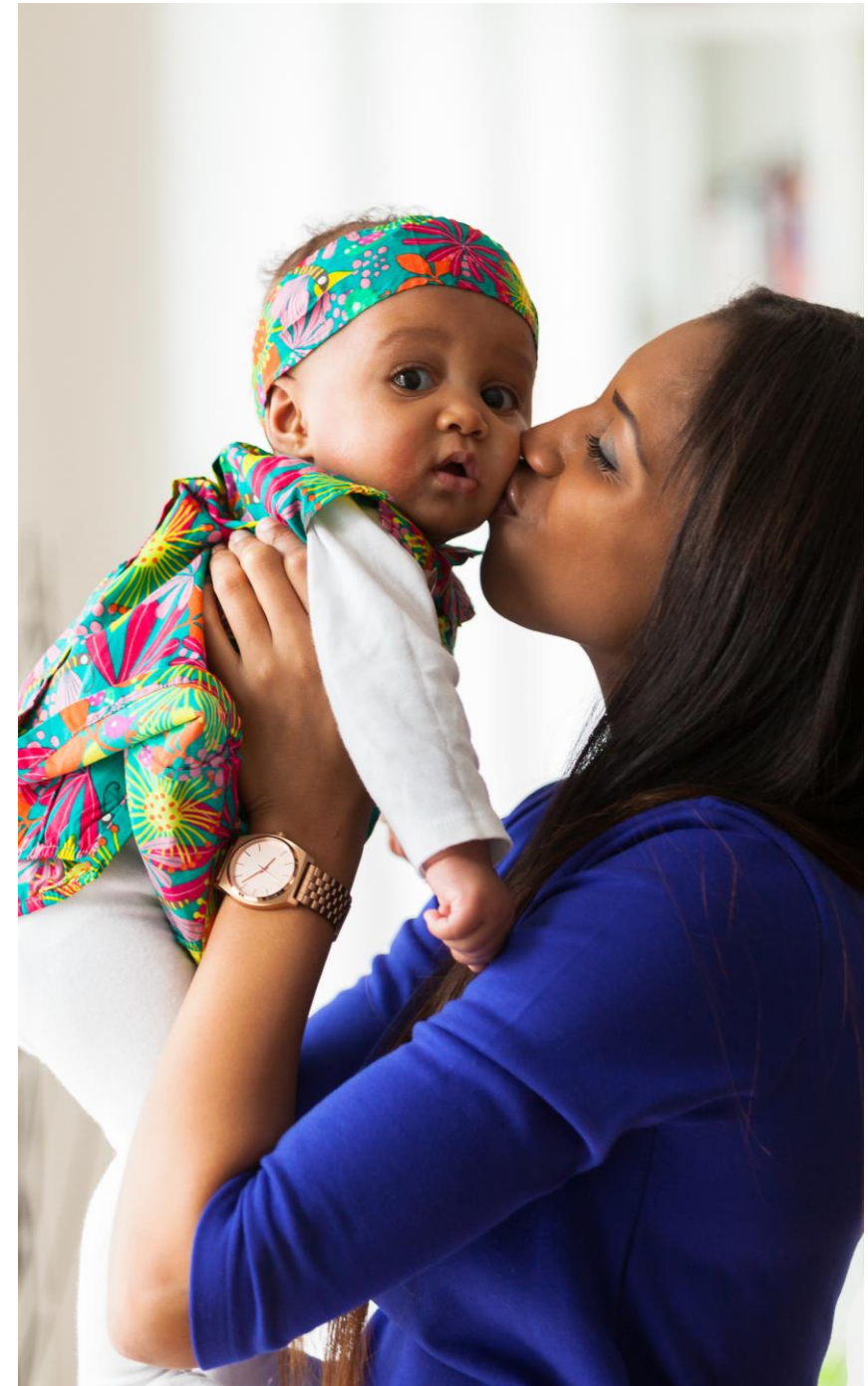


SMASH
THE
PATRIARCHY

Support women to redirect blame

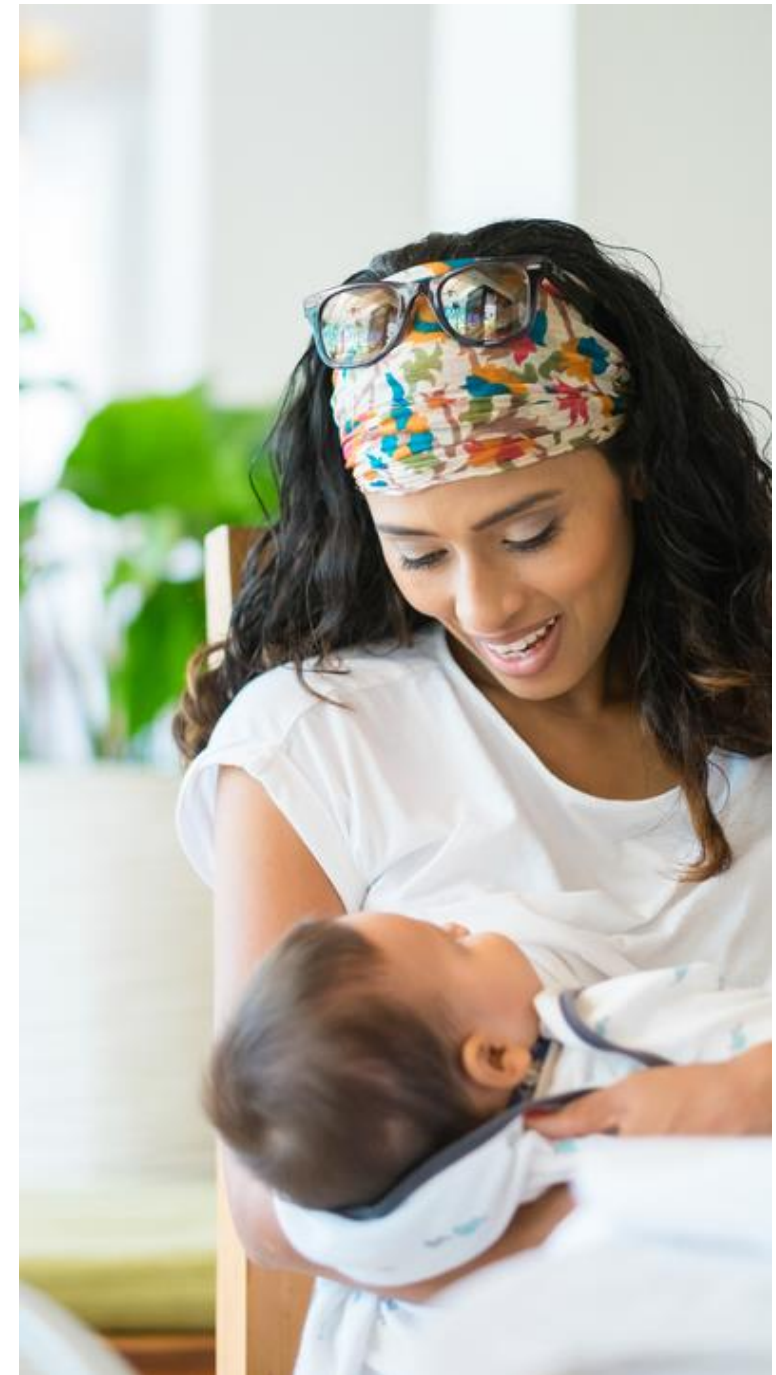
‘Women need to be reassured that they are not failures. Successful breastfeeding is not achieved by individual women – it is achieved by having the support of your immediate community and society. Unfortunately, this is lacking in our country.’

‘Society is failing mothers, not mothers failing’



Invest in mothers

‘Breastfeeding in the early weeks is a full-time job in itself. We should recognise this and help new mothers - like they do in other countries - so that they can get on with feeding and taking care of themselves and not have to also do everything else. Women end up bottle feeding as they think at least the baby can be fed by someone else and that’s one less thing to do.’



Kitzinger (1992) Ourselves as mothers

‘Mothers are instructed that they must keep the romance in her relationship good, cook gourmet food and produce candlelit dinners and at the same time be a perfect mother ...

A woman who catches sight of herself in the mirror sees a very different picture. And the message is clear: she is a failure’.

The Creative Motherhood Project

We asked over 1000 women how they felt about becoming a mother ...



Why is formula seen as the solution?

- Caring for a new baby is exhausting, however they are fed
- Why is the solution for someone else to feed the baby rather than do the housework and look after mum?
- Formula won't magically make other worries and stressors disappear
- **Breastfeeding mums get more sleep**



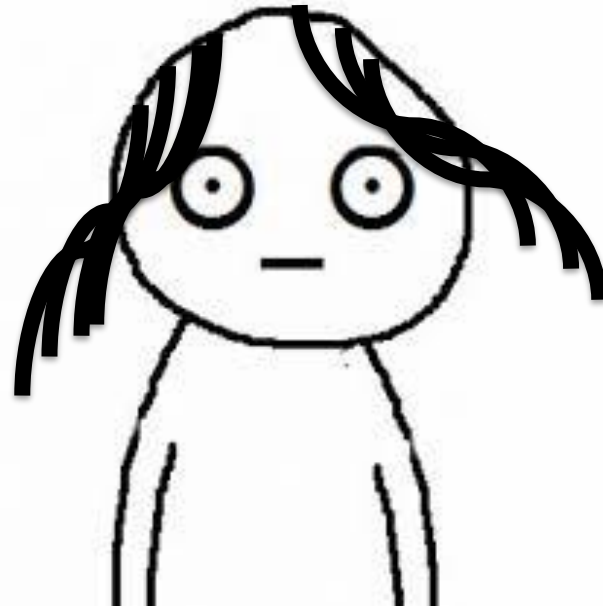
Doan T, et al: JCSM: official publication of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. 2014 Mar;10(3):313-9.

Give him to me, I'll give him a bottle and you can go out

You could get on with other things if I fed him

You're being selfish

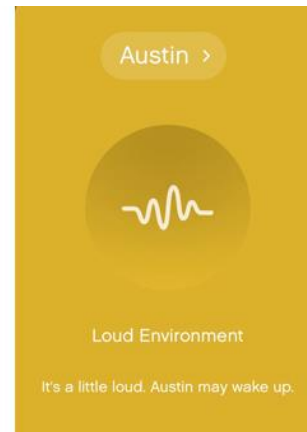
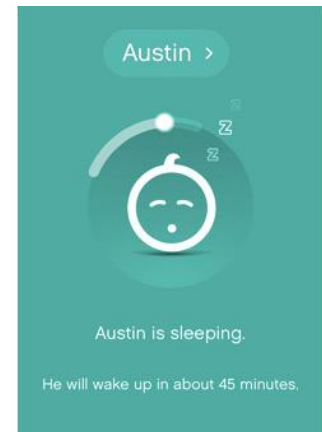
If you stop breastfeeding, I'll do half the feeds



You need to start caring for yourself

You're being a martyr

Fine – I tried to help, you're bringing this upon yourself



‘I was absolutely exhausted and overwhelmed with it all and a few people suggested I give up breastfeeding to get a break. I felt like a useless mother in so many other ways, but the breastfeeding was the part I really loved and felt like I was doing a good job at. It helped me stop, escape and just be whilst I was feeding. It was all the other things I wanted to escape from and stopping breastfeeding wouldn’t solve that.’



‘I hated my life and I hated myself. I thought I was a terrible, useless mother apart from breastfeeding, that was the one thing I was getting right.

Why did everyone want to take that away from me?’

**We need to
convince society
to value and care
for our new
mothers better**



