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“There are hundreds of thousands online waiting to hold your hand through difficult times”: experiences of using online parenting forums to support postpartum mental health and wellbeing.



Lauren McSorley, Dr. Nova Deighton-Smith, Dr. Kirsty Budds, Dr. Xu Wang
Leeds Beckett University



INTRODUCTION

- Approximately 20% of women experience mental health difficulties during pregnancy and/or up to 12 months post birth (Mind, 2020).
- Concerns often unreported owing to barriers such as stigma, failure to identify symptoms, or fear of consequences (Moore et al., 2019; Slade et al., 2010).
- Forums have been found to reduce loneliness and isolation in new mothers, and provide an alternative outlet for mothers to share concerns (Gleeson et al., 2019).
- Increasing numbers of new mothers are accessing peer and professional support online to support their maternal mental health. Although benefits of virtual support have been established, less is known about the impact of mothers utilising online support in lieu of conventional methods.

AIMS

The current study aimed to further investigate the role of forums by seeking information around women’s experiences of forum use for supporting their mental health and wellbeing. An anonymous, qualitative online survey was chosen to encourage disclosure. Using a qualitative survey, the study aimed to investigate:

- What motivates women to use the forum for mental health and wellbeing concerns, and how they engage with the forums.
- The type of responses or support women received, and the (self-perceived) impact this had on their postnatal mental health.
- How support from the forum linked to/ compared with experiences of support provided by offline sources such as family, friends, and healthcare professionals.

METHODS

- New mothers ($n=70$) who had used online forums to discuss their postnatal health or wellbeing in the previous 12 months, completed the survey between February-March 2021.
- Women also responded about their experiences of customary healthcare support.
- Responses were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). An inductive-deductive approach was utilised and four themes were generated.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Value of shared experiences and empathy.	The desire to connect with others who were going through similar experiences was identified as a main motivator of forum use. The sharing of experiences contributed to an atmosphere of support and acceptance; validating feelings and providing reassurance. Some participants indicated that they viewed experiential support from other parents as superior to the ‘generic’ responses offered by health professionals, viewing online responses as more supportive, personal, warm, and understanding.
Theme 2: Forum dynamics – a double edged sword.	Advantages such as anonymity, 24/7 access, and an abundance of immediately available advice were reported. However, some women described concerns and upsetting experiences, such as receiving negative and judgemental responses. Several women felt they had been ‘mum shamed’ and had their choices as a mother attacked. In some cases this led to increased feelings of anxiety, doubt, and failure.
Theme 3: Inconsistency of HCP support	Although several mothers praised the HCP support they had received, others felt as though concerns around their mental health were not acknowledged or taken seriously enough. Moreover, numerous women had decided not to disclose their mental health concerns to their GP or health visitor due to reasons such as rushed or baby focused appointments.
Theme 4: A Unique COVID context .	Many women reported an increase in forum usage due to the pandemic. This was due to several reasons, such as a lack of contact from health professionals, family and friends, and being unable to meet new mothers at traditional mother and baby groups. Forum use eased some of this loneliness and isolation. Additionally, several women stated that other new mothers were the only ones who could understand the unique context and difficulties of becoming a new mother at this time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study emphasises the importance, and effectiveness, of this kind of virtual ‘peer support’ that forums can provide. For many, forums foster a supportive community which is beneficial for postpartum wellbeing. However, unwelcomed, negative comments can lead to feelings of motherhood failure on some occasions, resulting in women avoiding posting through fear of negativity. The importance of mothers being able to access not only peer support, but trustworthy, accessible professional support online was highlighted. Future considerations for healthcare professionals and forum providers could include integrating online and offline support services and offering trained peer supporters if face-to-face healthcare services are limited.

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