

What do mums think about care and support for anxiety in pregnancy and after birth?

Anxiety is a common mental health condition that affects many women* during and after pregnancy. Studies show that 1 in 5 women experience moderate to severe perinatal anxiety. Early identification and management of perinatal anxiety is crucial to ensure women receive appropriate support and treatment, including psychological therapies, medication, or emotional and practical assistance from healthcare providers. However, many women don't access the care they need. This study explored women's experiences of perinatal mental health care to identify what they may have found challenging about accessing care and how acceptable they found the care they received.

What we did

60 women who had reported significant signs of anxiety or depression during pregnancy or after birth took part in interviews with the researchers. The women came from different parts of the country and from different ethnic backgrounds. Some had received treatment for their mental health while others had not.

What we found

Access to Care and Support

Women's experiences with maternity and mental health services significantly impacted their feelings about care.



When services were accessible and responsive, women felt reassured and supported. However, lack of availability, unfulfilled promises such as unanswered helplines, and poor-quality maternity care increased anxiety. Tailored care, such as additional scans after previous pregnancy loss, was seen as helpful. In contrast, services that failed to meet expectations led to frustration and distress.

Healthcare Professionals' Responses

The way healthcare professionals responded to women's concerns about anxiety was critical. Positive interactions, where healthcare professionals acknowledged anxiety and provided reassurance, made women feel supported. However, dismissive or unhelpful

comments, such as implying anxiety could harm the baby or that women should simply “enjoy” pregnancy, increased distress. A compassionate and understanding approach was highly valued.

Continuity of Care

Many women found it frustrating to repeat their story to multiple healthcare professionals due to a lack of continuity in care. This added to their emotional burden and sometimes discouraged them from seeking help. On the other hand, consistent care from the same provider fostered trust, making women feel safe and more willing to discuss mental health concerns.

Barriers to Accessing Treatment

Engaging with mental health services required effort from women, who often struggled with time constraints, sleep



deprivation, and childcare responsibilities. Being asked to self-refer was particularly challenging, as women did not always know where to start or felt discouraged by long waiting lists. Services that offered flexible options, such as online appointments or home visits, were more accessible.

Ethical Considerations in Care

Women felt that postnatal care often focused more on the baby than on their own well-being. Many wanted their individual needs to be acknowledged, and their treatment preferences respected. Some felt that their concerns were dismissed, such as being advised to let their baby cry when they found this distressing. Feeling heard and respected increased engagement with healthcare services.



Understanding the Care Pathway

A significant issue was the lack of clear information about available services, treatment options, and expected waiting times. Many women were unsure whether they would be referred to specialised perinatal mental health services or more general therapy. This uncertainty was particularly challenging for

women whose first language was not English. Clear explanations from healthcare professionals about the care pathway improved women's confidence and engagement.



Stigma and Fear of Judgment

Fear of being seen as a “bad mother” prevented some women from seeking help. Concerns about being judged by healthcare professionals, family, or friends, or even fears of child protection services becoming involved, discouraged women from disclosing their struggles. Some women chose to pay for private therapy to avoid these concerns, highlighting the need to reduce stigma and create a non-judgmental care environment.

Key Recommendations

This study highlights the need for improvements in perinatal mental health care to ensure that all women receive timely, effective, and compassionate support. Key recommendations include:

- Providing access to clear information about available services.
- Reducing stigma and fear surrounding mental health disclosure.
- Promoting continuity of care to build trust with healthcare professionals .
- Providing flexible and individualised support alongside formal treatments.

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**We use the terms ‘women’ and ‘mums’ to include women and birthing people.*