

HEALTH

3 Canadian women who are supporting mothers with postpartum depression

by EMILY MARSTEN
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Kristina Ducklow experienced postpartum depression (PPD) with her first child, so she was more prepared to experience PPD when her son Jack was born. PHOTO: KRISTINA DUCKLOW.

Many mothers in Canada are affected by postpartum depression (PPD) each year, but three women are raising awareness of their experiences and working to help support new mothers.

Statistics Canada's [Maternal Mental Health 2018/2019](#) survey says that 23 per cent of recent mothers in Canada report feelings consistent with PPD or an anxiety disorder.

PPD can affect mothers, fathers and adoptive parents, typically within the first two years after birth. Common symptoms are feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety and anger.

Amanda McMillan, supervisor of the perinatal mental health program at Families Matter, a Calgary based organization that focuses on helping families, says there's no formula to whom PPD affects.

Alberta Health Services (AHS) estimates that up to 15 per cent of mothers in Alberta are affected by PPD.

In 2018, over 52,000 children were born in Alberta, meaning approximately 7,800 mothers were likely affected.

Diagnosed with PPD

Before working at Families Matter, McMillan was caught off guard after the birth of her first child.

"He was 10 days old when I had my first panic attack. For me, I don't have a history of mental health struggles, so it was completely out of left field."

It wasn't until her husband booked an appointment with her family doctor that she was diagnosed with PPD.

"Because my panic attacks were very severe, I couldn't. I didn't want to be around my son."

McMillan learned later that her family had a history of PPD — but they had never talked about it.

"My mother was talking to her mother [...] about the struggles that I was going through, and my grandmother, who has six sisters, said, 'Oh, we all struggled with that.'"

Unlike McMillan, Vancouver native Kristina Ducklow has a history of depression. Although she knew PPD was a possibility, Ducklow's onset didn't come until about six months after her daughter was born.



Postpartum depression (PPD) affects many mothers in Canada, but there are many support systems available for new parents. GRAPHIC: EMILY MARSTEN.

"I remember my mom, she would get after me because I wasn't showering. I was like, 'Mom, I'm like 35 years old. I know I need to shower,'" she says. "But why? Why is it hard for me to do some of these basic things?"

Providing a space to talk

After finding help in healthcare practitioners, both McMillan and Ducklow decided they wanted to help other women like them.

McMillan has worked at Families Matter for more than a decade. Her team focuses on one-on-one interactions with new mothers through a peer support model

"We're just providing a space for the mom to talk about her experience," she says. "They're struggling with enjoying that time with their baby and they feel that they don't have people to talk to."

In 2019, almost 2,500 parents and children were a part of programming at Families Matter. Almost 180 families accessed perinatal mental health supports, including 25 fathers who attended a PPD information session.

For Ducklow, helping others began as a part of a leadership training program. Based in Vancouver, she chose to speak about her experience with PPD by creating a Facebook page and YouTube channel.

But after the program was done, she decided to continue facilitating the support groups — finding purpose through sharing her experience.

"They can just watch a video and feel comfort knowing, 'Oh, somebody else was feeling the same thing that I'm feeling.'"

Ducklow's Facebook support group now has 180 members. 71 people have subscribed to her YouTube channel and over 400 people follow her public PPD support page.

Paige Barlow, owner and founder of Moss Postpartum House in Calgary, is no stranger to the PPD that both Ducklow and McMillan experienced — having worked as a postpartum doula for almost a decade. Barlow believes that support is a critical component of helping new moms.

"I was often taking parents to multiple locations to get support," she says, "we were going into all these clinical spaces, and none of them felt like a home."

That's why she started the postpartum house, an all-encompassing business that focuses on in-house support from a variety of practitioners.

She wanted to create "a place where they can come and have tea, and I can feed them and hold their baby while they're in their assessment."

After only two years in operation, over 4,700 people have attended appointments, including over 100 mental health related appointments.

The ongoing process of combating PPD

For years, AHS has been trying to combat PPD — but it is an ongoing process.

In 2013, the AHS Public Health PPD Policy Suite was developed in an attempt to standardize PPD screening.

However, these protocols were re-written in [The Public Health PPD Screening Policy Suite](#) that came into effect on March 6, 2019, replacing all previous protocols.

Screening is conducted by Public Health Nurses (PHN), and is offered to mothers who come for their first regular Public Health Well Child Clinic visit, typically when the baby is two months old.

Owner and founder of Moss Postpartum House, Paige Barlow helps families from her personal experience as a mother, but also from her insight as a doula. PHOTO: PAIGE BARLOW.

After the screening is completed, the nurses will send the assessment results to the mother's health care professional and/or family physician.

This new policy raises the question, why did the initial protocols need to be further developed? It's possible that because PPD is an issue that will continue to affect Albertans, it will need to be taken under further scrutiny on how it continues to be addressed in the province.

The new policy strives to improve mental health, "through a standardized and coordinated approach to PPD screening, referral and surveillance within Public Health Child Clinic."

Isolation during COVID-19

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns, supporting new mothers is even more critical.

Barlow says that because of the pandemic, Moss Postpartum House is offering various appointments over the phone and through video calling.

McMillan's teams immediately transitioned into meeting in their support groups over video calling.

She encourages mothers to be aware of how they're feeling. "If you know that this is not you, if this is not what you expected it to be and that you are struggling, don't push through. Ask for help."

"One of our challenges still to this day is letting people know that there is this type of support out there."

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