

# Father's Reaching Out: Postnatal depression support for partners

*If a wife or partner is suffering from postnatal depression, it may also have an effect on the husbands or partners. Mark Williams, founder of Father's Reaching Out, a support group for men whose partners are suffering from this condition, describes his personal story*

I am the founder of Father's Reaching Out. My aim since October 2011 has been to raise awareness of the effect of postnatal depression on the husbands or partners of the women suffering from this depression.

Over the last year, I have set up and ran many support and awareness groups for men whose wives or partners are, or have suffered with postnatal depression. I have also set up a website to provide information and support for partners in this position. Most recently I have written a book titled, *'Mark Williams, Fathers Reaching Out'*. This book is a personal account of my own experience of postnatal depression and it was written with the hope that the reader will find comfort in knowing that they are not alone and things can get better over time.

## My personal experience

My decision to set up these groups and raise awareness came from my personal experience of postnatal depression. In 2004, my wife suffered from this condition for almost 2 years and this time was one of the hardest times of our lives.

In May 2002 I married my partner of 6 years, Michelle. It was a fabulous happy day. The year after, we decided that we were ready to start a family. When we realised that Michelle was

pregnant, we were overwhelmed.

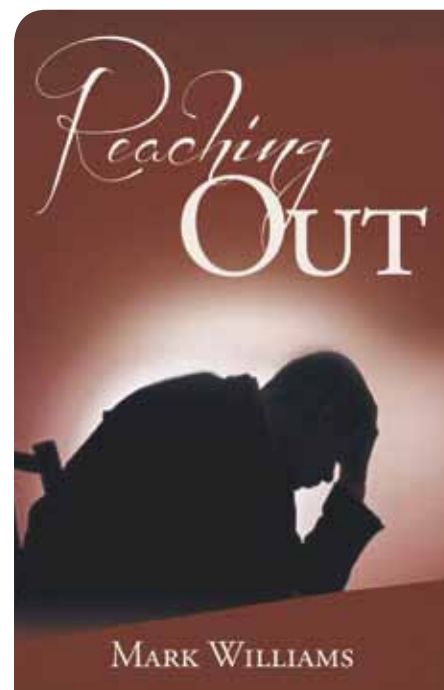
Michelle's pregnancy went smoothly and she worked right up until the time that she had planned to. Everything was prepared for our new baby and we were looking forward to becoming parents.

The baby was due in December and Michelle's sisters had relatively easy births, and we thought it would be the same for Michelle. Little did we know! We went to the hospital when Michelle started having contractions, and many hours later there was still no sign of the baby. Michelle had been given pethidine and had her waters broken. She was having strong contractions for which she was using gas and air, but still Michelle was not ready to deliver. As time went by I was getting tired—so Michelle must have been exhausted. After about 18 hours, three doctors came into the room. It reminded me of a scene from casualty, and they advised us that Michelle would need an emergency caesarean. At this point, I had my first and only panic attack. I was scared and had many unanswered questions.

From then on, things went quite quickly and we were taken into theatre. On 1 December at 2.16 pm, our son was brought into the world. He was given to me and, if I am honest, I did not get that instant rush of love that many say they experience. I was excited, but shocked and worn out by the birth.

After the birth, they took Michelle and Ethan, our new son, into an open ward where they had to stay for 3 days. We know now (but did not

realise at the time) that Michelle's depression started as soon as she gave birth. Michelle's behaviour changed immediately. In all the time I have known Michelle, I had never seen her behaving the way she was. She was clingy and didn't want me to go anywhere without her. It was worrying, but I thought she had just gone through a difficult time and was tired; I didn't know anything about depression and hadn't even thought of it. If I had been aware of the signs, then I could have told the nurses and got help sooner.



*'Reaching Out' by Mark Williams was published in August 2012. The book is an emotional and honest account of the experience that both Mark and his wife have had of depression*

### Mark Williams

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Michelle seemed frightened and agitated, it was like she was a different person. All her confidence had gone, and she didn't think she could look after Ethan. She also didn't want any visitors. As we left to go home, I hoped it would become easier for Michelle. However, it turned out to be harder.

We were lucky as we had a lot of family support. Michelle's mum stayed with us for the first week, but even then, we still found it exhausting. Michelle didn't sleep for two weeks and was not eating much; later on she told me that she had to force herself to eat.

What shocked me the most was that her confidence had completely shattered. She was very unsure of herself, even though she was doing a good job of looking after Ethan. Michelle had been previously employed as a team leader and was good in pressurised situations. However, her confidence and motivation had become so low at times, that she found it difficult to do the basic things around the house. Some days she didn't even want to get out of bed.

After 3 weeks I phoned my boss and explained that I wouldn't yet be able to return to work. He was helpful and understanding. I think that he had experienced depression in his own life, which helped him to understand the situation I was currently in.

The hard thing was that having a baby is supposed to be such a happy time in your life, therefore when families experience postnatal depression, they are reluctant to talk about how they are feeling as they are not experiencing that happy time. It gives postnatal depression a stigma. Some people think that you don't want to love your child, which is incorrect.

What I found extremely hard was

finding myself in charge of the house and the bills, while also caring for my wife and son. I could not work, so money became an issue, and the isolation I felt was beginning to feel unbearable at times.

### Diagnosis and support

Michelle suffered from panic attacks and her heart would race. She would get very worried by this. The health visitor noticed that Michelle wasn't well and said that she could be suffering from postnatal depression. I was shocked. My wife could not be depressed, she is always happy and we had been looking forward to having our baby. The health visitor explained what postnatal depression was. I did not completely understand it at the time, but I was more informed than I had been. In a way it was a relief, as at least we knew why Michelle was feeling and acting the way she was. We had a great house, good jobs, good friends and family. I was very uneducated about depression and didn't know anything about the condition. We made an hospital appointment immediately, which turned out to be the first of many. Michelle was diagnosed as having postnatal depression and was prescribed anti-depressants.

Christmas was approaching and Ethan was nearly 4 weeks old. In the past, I had imagined our first Christmas as a family many times, and had always thought it would be the best Christmas ever. It wasn't, it was one of the hardest Christmases I have ever known as I felt alone and isolated.

The medication that Michelle was given was supposed to slow down her thoughts and help her sleep. It was difficult seeing Michelle as she was, she

was normally so strong willed. Now I was in charge, which I found hard to deal with. Our families were amazing, they would look after the baby for us to have a break. On returning I would get anxiety knowing that I was going back to our situation. When I was alone I still felt that I should be with Michelle. I would explain to people about postnatal depression and some people said, 'My wife had that, but she was better in a few weeks'. I now know that what they were describing was the baby blues, which is very common. Postnatal depression and psychosis are much more complex and it can take a long time to recover.

As time went by, Michelle's illness got worse, the medication wasn't working and had to be changed several times. Michelle was now involved with the mental health team and we would have people coming out to support Michelle. She also attended a day centre. It was very hard for me to accept that Michelle needed this level of support. Michelle could not accept how she was feeling and did not understand why she was feeling that way. She tried many things to get better, including acupuncture, hypnotherapy and yoga. At one point she even wanted to go into hospital as she thought that this might help her get better. She also saw a psychiatrist and a psychologist.

The worse thing about depression is that it is an illness that you can't see, and recovery time is not specific. If you broke your leg you would have a plaster and everyone would be able to see your injury, you would also be given a timescale for recovery.

What was and still is alarming is the stigma that is associated with depression. Many people do not understand depression and to many it is not seen or treated as an illness. Many people also do not understand why you can't just snap out of it and pull yourself together. It is much more complicated than this and recovery can be a long and hard process.

I now know, based on my own experience of the illness, that depression is something that you have

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to have experienced to totally believe and understand it. There are many symptoms of depression, and no set timescale as to when you will recover from it.

After a few months, Michelle was getting darker days and her mind was full of constant negative thoughts. They changed her tablets, and it was frustrating as they can take up to 4 weeks to have an effect. It was a waiting game to see if they would work. Michelle's moods were unusual, she would be okay one minute and I would start to think that maybe this time it will last, and then she would have a low day again and become a different person.

Having to look after a new-born baby is hard enough for any parent, but depression adds to the pressure. Having a supportive family and friends eased this pressure. I found it hard not knowing how long the depression was going to last for, and the fact that there was not any help or support specifically for men or partners in my position was unbelievable. This has now improved with Mind and other charities, but I believe there still needs to be much more support.

Approximately 10–15% of women



In 2012, Mark Williams was awarded the 'Wales Inspirational Dad of the Year Award'

» *Approximately 10–15% of women are recorded as having postnatal depression, so think how many families are affected. Families may not seek help due to the stigma of mental health, and also because they believe social services could get involved, and this could result in their children being taken away.* «

are recorded as having postnatal depression, so think how many families are affected. Families may not seek help due to the stigma of mental health, and also because they believe social services could get involved, and this could result in their children being taken away. More support groups and awareness is needed to educate families about postnatal depression and to help them understand that it is an illness and that they can get help.

When Michelle was getting better, I found her personality changing back to how she was before. I had to change from being a carer to being a husband again. We had to form a proper relationship, dealing with each other in normal circumstances. Families can struggle to develop the same relationship, and at this point, some families do fall apart.

Michelle's illness affected me in many ways. When you are in that pressure cooker it feels as if you are the only one going through this illness. I drunk more and my tolerance level went up. I drank when everyone went to bed and I would go off the rails. My personality was not the same, and my friends noticed that I would become very moody after a few drinks. I was now feeling depressed myself. To cope with the depression I would drink to blank things out. I felt very anxious and did not have anybody to turn to.

My wife and I are very positive people, and until I was 30 years old I did not really know anything about depression, and to be honest I just dismissed it. Having had to deal with depression as part of my life, I have come to understand it and

can appreciate how difficult it is for others that suffer from depression or experience it within their family. I am incredibly thankful that Michelle recovered. It was never that she didn't love my son, but she just didn't think she could look after him. We feel that it was the trauma of the birth and the lack of sleep that had a massive impact.

After cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and medication, Michelle got better, but it took up to 18 months. CBT should be more readily available, it was a great help to Michelle and she was able to change the way she was thinking about things and become more positive. I believe that there is much media attention on other illness and not enough on mental health.

One thing that I have learnt about depression, is that anyone can suffer from it at any stage of his or her lives. Seeing your partner going through it at what is supposed to be a happy time in one's life is very hard to deal with. I would encourage anyone who is experiencing symptoms of depression to talk about how they are feeling and to seek help as soon as possible. The sooner you seek help, the sooner you will feel better.

Our son Ethan is now 7 years old and is a very happy and contented little boy. We absolutely adore him, he makes us laugh and has his own unique quirky personality. We can't imagine our lives without him. **JHV**

Visit Mark Williams' website at [www.fathersreachingout.com](http://www.fathersreachingout.com) which acts as a support group and network for men whose wives or partners are suffering from postnatal depression.