

PPMD sufferers are not alone

By Melannie Hennessey
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

Women who suffer from a postpartum mood disorder (PPMD) need to know they're not alone and the symptoms they're experiencing are very real.

This was one of the key points raised during a PPMD forum hosted by the Region last week — an event that brought together more than 120 community professionals who work in the area of identifying and treating PPMD.

The Region describes PPMD as the range of mood disorders that can affect women following the birth of their babies. Symptoms can include sadness, fatigue, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, withdrawal from family and friends, and more.

"We know that up to 80 per cent of new mothers will experience postpartum blues and another 10 to 20 per cent will experience postpartum depression," said Halton Medical Officer of Health Dr. Bob Nosal. "It's important to bring community partners together to plan to ensure a wide range of services to better support women who experience PPMD."

Amongst the speakers of the day was Canadian singer/songwriter Amy Sky, who shared her experience in dealing with a postpartum mood disorder.

She said at first, it was difficult for her to go public about the hard times she went through in becoming a mother.

"But I thought I owe it to myself and women around the world to be honest," she said. "Postpartum depression is one of the most hidden, dark zones. Far from being shunned for telling the ugly truth, the almost universal response I've had is support and gratitude."

She said after the birth of her daughter, she felt very connected to her, but started experiencing other strange feelings.

"I felt like my brain had kind of split," she said. "One part was committed to being there for her and it was fighting with the other part of my brain that just wanted to check out into blackness."

She described the six months following the birth of her first child as an "emotional rollercoaster" that even included hallucinations and distortions of sights and sounds.

"The doctor said, 'You probably have postpartum depression' and I said, 'I'm not depressed,'" Sky told the audience. "My husband said, 'You're not depressed — you're kind of whacky.' We were both in denial."

At one particularly low point, Sky said she thought she was a dead person trapped in a living person's body.

"I thought, well I'm already dead, so why don't I just take my own life?" she said.

She called a support line and the person on the other end of the phone helped her see what she was experiencing wasn't reality.

"This reinforces how important it is for new mothers to have information and non-judgmental support 24 hours a day," she said. "It is so important that women are informed about the very, very wide range of almost comical symptoms you can have with a postpartum disorder."

She emphasized the value of having a

support system in place to get through the tough times PPMD can bring, noting her mother and husband told her at the time they would do whatever they could to help her.

"That was my medication," she said.

But not everyone has the understanding and support of those closest to them, according to a recent study discussed at the forum by Dr. Wendy Sword, an assistant dean and associate professor at the McMaster University School of Nursing.

The study — of 18 women who had just given birth and been referred by a public health nurse for probable postpartum depression — found the friends and family of some women would 'normalize' their symptoms.

"Lack of understanding also came into play," Dr. Sword noted. "(One woman said), 'My husband mentioned something to his friends and they were like, 'Oh well, my wife never had that.' It was like if they didn't have it, why does my wife have it?'"

She said even health-care providers often lack knowledge about postpartum depression and can try to normalize symptoms.

For more information on PPMD symptoms and local supports visit www.halton.ca/PPMD.

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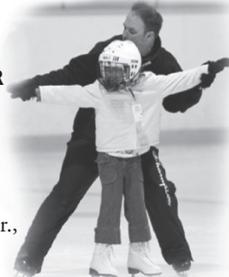
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