



# Stories from the heart and mind

A collection of stories and key messages from parents with mental health difficulties



"It is only in our darkest hours that we may discover the true strength of the brilliant light within ourselves that can never, ever, be dimmed." Doe Zantamata

## Trapped by love

I should say something. I promised myself I would. But now I'm not sure.

While the doctor examines my baby, I'm searching in my bag for a bottle of water. My throat's so dry and it's boiling in here. There's everything Asha needs but I forgot my own drink. The GP tells me I have a healthy, happy baby, that I'm looking after her well and it seems like that's that. Appointment over.

But how does she know? I'm the problem, not my lovely girl. I want to be the best mum ever - but I'm so tired. And when Asha cries, I cry too. More than she does. Bucketfuls. My mum says it's normal. My sister says I should get a grip, my aunty messages to remind me to heat baby's bottle just so. It nearly killed me to tell Dev I thought I'd got baby blues. He just said, don't worry, you're fine, you're amazing. I know they're supporting me, but I never get a minute's peace.

"How are you really, Anjani?" the doctor asks.

Really? My heart pounds. I keep my hand over my mouth. There are words in there. I just can't get them out.

"I..."

The doctor waits. I want to say something, I do. It's now or never. But...

"I'm..." I take a deep breath. Nothing comes.

The doctor gets me some water. In my head, I'm saying, I think I need help. I'm depress...

I gulp the drink too fast.

"I'm normal," I blurt, nearly coughing the water up all over her. "No, not. Not normal."

I could cry. Again. I'm 27 years old and I can't string a sentence together.

"Yes, normal," the doctor says, which makes me look up at her. "I mean, it's usual to feel different, not yourself. But what's normal, anyway?" She smiles. "Normal is a terrible word. Let's start with today. Talk me through what happened this morning. What time did you get up?"

And somehow that was okay. Among the details of breakfast, the three calls from my mum telling me what to do, the messages from Dev, I manage to tell her I want to stop feeling so bad. I want to be a mum in my own way.

I leave the surgery, still feeling hot but lighter. I said it. Out loud, I asked for help and it was okay. Asha smiles at me. I'll see the health visitor again, alone this time. I put the leaflet for the children's centre safely in my bag.

### Anjani - age 27, suffering from post-natal depression

Speak up! Asking for help, helps! You will be heard.  
People will help you build your confidence to cope.



## On my own (and not)

**Kayleigh:**

*Woz u in Kings Head earlier?*

**Toni:**

*Yeah. Soz, didn't think u would come with baby. Usual laughs with the girl!*

**Kayleigh:**

*Whatevs. No space for buggy, let alone my fat arse*

**Toni:**

*LOLZ*

Kayleigh exits group

I try calling my cousin. Not in. My gran can't hear her phone.

I walk to the park. Can't go home, the brothers hate the baby crying. And mum's out of it. As soon as I sit on the park bench, the baby starts. "Quiet you," I say. I don't pick her up, it just makes it worse.

Flicking on my phone, I see this mental health thing. At school I got sent to see a social worker for drinking. I wasn't mad, I was like durr, it's not drugs is it? And then I see this vid. There's a mum on a park bench (!) talking about how she lost enjoyment of her baby. My stomach cramps. Then she tells how she was down and didn't realise that the baby could feel it. WTF? Plus, there's different types of crying she says, like what's a "pick me up" cry. Or a "feed me" cry. My throat goes all thick. No-one told me that either.

There's a call us button. If I press it they'll think I'm a bad mum and report me to social services. The vid plays again. The good mum says it can be overwhelming having a baby. Being depressed can take longer to mend than a broken leg. You have to properly recover. Take time to adapt.

I start sweating, if I tell them how I feel they'll take the baby off me, but if I don't talk to someone, I seriously DO NOT KNOW what I'll do.

Then somehow my thumb's on the screen. It's ringing. A lady answers. She's from round here, it's a charity. And once I start talking, I don't stop till my credit's gone.

It does take time to get better. I know that fears are fears. Sometimes they're real, sometimes they aren't real. No-one in Bexley wants to take your baby. As long as she's safe, they'll help me look after her. Also I have a new friend with a baby. Yea! They look bo-cute together.

Kayleigh x

p.s. I'm still FAT

**Kayleigh – age 17/18, depressed with alcohol misuse**

**You're not alone. Help yourself to help your baby. Bexley supports mums to keep their babies healthy and safe.**



## Work is a picnic

Shall I stay or not? It's Tuesday morning at the children's centre. I recognise one of the mums in the group from ante-natal classes. She's wearing a floaty thin knit cardigan, it's cream and there's no baby sick. She's a vision of calm while I clutch a list of questions that stretches to London and back. I twist my ring and cover the raw skin on the back of my hand, thinking of those train journeys to work and how different my life is now.

If I felt stressed, I used to go to the gym. That was most days. I'd never leave work without a tidy desk and a plan for the morning. I was a bit OCD as a teenager, but life was manageable. I never expected to have a baby.

A nurse is here today to talk about introducing baby to solids. The room is full of toys and small tables covered with bright fruity plastic. There's one of those awful pictures of a smiling baby covered in food. I can't stop myself wondering how they can keep the place clean. My eyes flash to the door - if I'm leaving, I'd better make a quick exit.

But I'm here because I'm already panicking that I'll give Gemma the wrong foods and she'll choke. Or maybe I've misread the signals and she's not ready for solids? I google everything but now I don't know what to believe. The other list I have is of all the things that Gemma might die from. I've imagined every catastrophe, vividly.

I stay standing while the nurse introduces herself. She's reassuring and detailed. We're all good mums she says. And then she turns to the woman with the cream cardigan and says, "And I want you to remember, your baby isn't going to die."

I swallow hard, it's not just me who thinks that. And she says to another mum that having a baby is harder than going to work. I catch a breath, steadying myself on a chair. I agree.

I look at my list of questions. We are real women, with real babies and there's a real person here to help. Maybe it won't stop me getting anxious but for an hour or so, I can feel calmer and get some proper answers.

**Anne – age 30 has Perinatal Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and anxiety/panic attacks**

There are services for everyone and there are all sorts of mums, Real advice is out there, connecting with other mums can reduce anxiety.



## In it together

TV on mute, phone on charge in the kitchen, twins asleep, the older two at their aunties and Alan's crumpled in the armchair - take-away curry half eaten, eyes going. I imagine I'm in a lovely garden somewhere, neat grass sprinkled with tiny daisies. The ringing in my ears has stopped and I'm able to think. I want to stay here and let the relief sink in.

A family support worker helped us get this Friday night moment of peace, to start to get ourselves sorted. We knew we weren't coping. Alan lost his job, his dad got dementia and he's the carer. I used to be the strong one, but the babies are so demanding. I couldn't seem to get anything right, couldn't get the older kids to school, couldn't get myself dressed some days. Convinced myself that nothing and no-one could help.

But it's been better these last few weeks. Karen, the family worker, got my head a bit straighter. She's reminded me that I've got friends who I could ask to look after the older two for a few hours on a Wednesday. I cringed but I did it. We went together to see if Alan's sister could take some weight off, sort out dad on Saturdays. I managed to get a charity to find us some bunkbeds.

I'd stopped taking anti-depressants when I was pregnant and didn't want to start again. It used to make me feel like a failure. It doesn't now. You see more on TV about depression.

"You're miles away," Alan says. I smile slowly, glad to be sat down or my legs might go.



As well as the practical stuff, the support has helped me remember that I won't always feel like this. I hadn't realised the impact the twins would have on the family, on us, on my body.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks. I take my time to reply, letting my jumbled thoughts settle. Karen talks a lot about resilience, about bouncing back.

"I was wondering about getting a plant for the windowsill. Some daffs, maybe, like the neighbours?"

"Why not?" Alan replies. "The kitchen could do with a spot of paint. Maybe yellow?"

It's a real conversation. He's a good man. I look forward to next Friday.

**Daz and Caz - both aged 35 - mum and dad, both clinically depressed**

**Help is available for families, it's not just mum, we're in it together.**



## When one door closes, another opens.

Sandra speaks so quietly, I have to lean in. “But when you’re waiting for the door to be slammed in your face, for the smash of glass and the light to go out you don’t see the new door that’s opening. It can take years and years before you even realise there’s another door.”

It’s a tough interview. Sandra wants to tell me her story but fidgets in her chair, turning away, cheeks burning. “I didn’t think I was dying. I was dying. And I wasn’t unhappy because I thought, if somehow the baby survives, she’ll be put up for adoption. She’ll have a better life without me, safe from that monster.”

I gulp, glad she’s not making eye contact.

“I was properly mad. I had a psychotic episode and ended up in the nut house. Broken bones and brain.” Sandra buries herself in her hoodie.

“How’s baby Rose?” I ask.

Holding out her phone Sandra shows me a picture, “I get to see her at the foster carers. Beautiful, isn’t she?”

I feel Sandra’s pain, a tug of love.

“What helped?” I try to take the interview forward.

“I got help from the police, the doctors, the psychologist, the social workers, the nurses, the staff here at the refuge, the other women, from the volunteers, everyone. They’ve seen it all. Abuse, violence, suicide. I didn’t think I’d ever get better. Not sure I am most days.”

“And what would you say to someone who finds themselves in such a difficult situation?”

“Don’t hide what’s happening. It was good that outsiders got involved. There were massive files on me. People knew what happened in my life, they couldn’t stop me from going back to him, from being a f\*\*k-up, but it was all written down. They believed me. They listened. When your brain shuts down, it’s for a reason.”

I want to say what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, to remind her she’s a survivor, to give her a hug. But I know touching can be tricky.

“One of the girls here told me this quote. ‘There comes a time when you have to choose between turning the page and closing the book.’ Sandra says more clearly. “I’m working my way up to a new door.”

**Sandra – aged 36, post-partum psychosis due to abuse**

**There’s support for serious mental health issues, it takes time to get better but you can get the right services for you, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.**



## Back to school

I'm in a Dad and baby session. There are only four of us and none of us wants to be here. Dads don't ask for help. I'm here because I got told to come.

It got to the stage where I'd get in from work, Sal would see me, wipe her tears away and just hand the baby over to me. Then she'd be watching me like a hawk. Whatever I did would be wrong. I could see her getting annoyed that I hadn't put the nappy on right or heated the food up properly. It wasn't safe to leave little Sammy in the car seat on the kitchen table while I cleared up after dinner, so then Sal's tears would start again.

There was no point talking to my mum and dad or hers, that was storing up trouble and I didn't want to be disloyal. I could see Sammy really needed his mum, but it all got really heavy. If I had him on my chest while the TV was on, she'd accuse me of getting possessive and take him away, then just leave him in his cot. Poor little mite. It was lucky I was home when the health visitor came. She spotted Sal wasn't coping straight away.

"It's like when you get a real flu," she said seriously. "Not man flu! The kind that knocks you off your feet and lasts weeks." Then she turned to me and said, "Flu's catching... how's dad doing?"

I said I was alright. But she wasn't buying it. So, I got told in a straightforward way that I needed to go to St Peters on a Saturday morning, between 10.30am and 12 and to bring Sammy. To get through the door I told myself I had no choice. That it was for Sammy. And that while I would never say this out loud, it was for my marriage. And if Sal was going to get help, I had to show her I was getting it too.

In room 2c – where I used to have history, us four dads get shown modern parenting techniques. It's small details that I hadn't thought about, like the baby's temperature, like lighting in the room. And like getting enjoyment from being with Sammy. I hadn't even thought about that. I didn't know I needed help, didn't know it was there.

I love my boy Sammy and I love my wife. I want to thank the charity Mind for putting those classes on. And to the other dads for turning up.

**Dean – aged 30, father struggling to cope with how to best support his wife who is low in mood**

**We're here for dads too.**



# Bexley S.H.I.E.L.D.

Email: [shield@bexley.gov.uk](mailto:shield@bexley.gov.uk)

Website: [www.bexleyscb.org.uk](http://www.bexleyscb.org.uk)

Directory of Services: Bexley 'Parentcare' is a new joint initiative between the NHS in Bexley, the London Borough of Bexley, and local community and voluntary groups that work specifically with parents and carers of children aged 0-18 years. It has been created in response to suggestions from parents and carers, who said Bexley needs a single hub where parents and carers can find out about local services and resources that support Bexley's parents and carers. Further information is available in the leaflet and a list of services in the [directory](#) –just click on 'Bexley Parentcare'.





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