

AAP NEWS STORY

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By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent

BRISBANE, April 19 AAP - When Sydney mother Paige Nelson was six months' pregnant with her son, she fell into such a severe depression she no longer wanted to live.

Her feelings were so overwhelming, she was unable to get out of bed and look after her young daughter, a toddler at the time.

"I didn't know what I was doing having another baby," said the mother of two, who had a supportive husband and had only ever wanted to be a mum.

While much has been written about the baby blues - or depression once a child is born - psychiatrists are starting to realise mood disorders during pregnancy are just as common.

Up to 20 per cent of pregnant women experience some level of anxiety and depression and for the benefit of both mother and child, experts say such problems need to be recognised, acknowledged and treated without delay.

But there's a dilemma.

One type of anti-depressant has been linked, though not conclusively, to a slightly increased risk of minor, correctable heart defects and babies born to mothers on the medication can sometimes suffer withdrawal symptoms, the worst being a mild seizure.

Then again, research is starting to suggest babies born to distressed, unmedicated women may be over-sensitive to stress.

Psychiatrist Marie-Paule Austin, of Sydney's Black Dog Institute, says Australian research is showing such babies have changes in their levels of the stress hormone cortisol at six months of age.

"They seem to have a prolonged cortisol response following an emotional stressor," Associate Professor Austin said in an interview.

Although researchers at the University of New South Wales are still analysing the data, Prof Austin says their preliminary findings support the hypothesis that how a person responds to negative life events may be affected to some degree by what happens in the womb.

In other words, there's a possibility that children born to depressed and overly-anxious mothers may be physiologically more vulnerable to emotional disorders such as depression as adults.

Already, researchers in Britain have reported an association between mothers who were highly anxious in the last trimester of pregnancy and increased levels of hyperactivity in their children up to seven years of age.

Other studies have shown such mothers are more likely to give birth to premature and low birthweight babies.

And A/Prof Austin says they may be less able to care for themselves during pregnancy, turning to alcohol or cigarettes to alleviate their symptoms.

So the question about whether to take anti-depressants during pregnancy is far from black and white.

But for some mothers, like Mrs Nelson, whose name has been changed to protect the identify of herself and her family, medication in pregnancy may be life-saving.

"Medication ... made a huge difference," she said.

So much so Mrs Nelson, who told her story to help other women in the same situation, had a "fantastic" birth and emerged completely out of her black hole.

"For the first three months of my son's life I was perfectly normal and I was so excited," she said.

But her reprieve was short-lived.

About 40 per cent of women who suffer depression in pregnancy relapse and dive into another downer at some stage post-natally.

Unfortunately, Mrs Nelson was one.

Her post-natal depression was so severe she started cutting herself with knives.

"I was really suicidal," she said.

"I felt like there was a little demon sitting on my shoulder whispering these thoughts into my head and I was even getting flashes of myself harming the baby, flashes of suffocating the baby with a pillow when he was crying, that sort of thing which I've actually learnt a lot of mothers have, even non-depressed mothers, so they're perfectly normal thoughts to have just as a result of fatigue.

"Even my husband admitted to having thoughts like that every now and then which made me feel a lot better because he's perfectly normal."

Mrs Nelson was lucky to have a strong support crew around her.

For the first month, people at her church drew up a roster and stayed with her when her husband was at work.

She shared her problems at group therapy sessions attended by women going through the same thing and she found an understanding psychiatrist.

"He said most of my problems were all chemical based in my brain, that there was a solution and we just had to find it," Mrs Nelson said.

"It's fantastic to know that ... I'm not a pathetic mother. I'm actually a sick person and I've got a disease and it can be overcome.

"I'm finding that fiddling with my medication ... I am getting better and it's nice to know it's not just about me. It's about my brain and my brain doesn't work very well at times."

A/Prof Austin said women may slump into a depression during the child-bearing years for many reasons including low self-esteem, perfectionistic personalities or issues relating to how they were raised as children.

"The ones that have got issues from inadequate parenting or outright abuse, they have enormous anxieties about: 'How will I cope as a parent, I don't know what it is to be parented well'" she said.

"If they hadn't formed a secure attachment to a parenting figure, usually the mother, then they're not in a good position to develop that with their own child without some intervention.

"It's not something that occurs automatically. There's got to have been some kind of role model so that they internalise a way of behaving and responding emotionally to a baby."

Whatever the problem, Prof Austin said the key for women was not to suffer in silence.

Mrs Nelson is testimony to how women can come through the experience.

"So many people put on a face when they're feeling depressed, they don't want others to see what they're going through," she said.

"But there really are so many other women out there going through the same thing and there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

"I think the most important thing to do is to let people know what's going on and to really ask for the help that you need because it is out there."

To hear more about Mrs Nelson's story and to learn more about depression during pregnancy and post-natally, go to the Black Dog Institute's website at www.blackdoginstitute.org.au