

Do social media networks improve the mental health of women in the perinatal period?

Dr Abigail Swerdlow¹, Dr Tamar Nisner²

1 ST5 Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London UK

2 GP, Watling Medical Centre, Stanmore, Middlesex UK

Background:

Up to 1 in 5 women have mental health problems in pregnancy or after birth. If untreated, this can have an enormous impact on the mother and her family. Evidence has shown that intervening in this perinatal period can improve outcomes.

Social media often has been said to be associated with poor mental health, including increased rates of depression, anxiety and poor sleep.

Aims

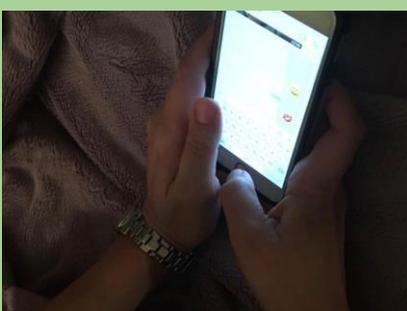
A retrospective evaluation of social media, specifically a Whatsapp group, as a peer support setting for a cohort of pregnant doctors all due to give birth within several weeks of each other, and the effect of the group on the participants' mental health during the perinatal period.

Hypothesis:

Given a shared set of life experiences at the outset, the participants would experience the network as supportive, and belonging to the group would address loneliness and reduce anxiety and therefore be beneficial to their mental health at this time of vulnerability.

Methods:

A Whatsapp group set up for doctors who were due to give birth in May 2018, an offshoot of a wider facebook group for physician mothers in the UK, provided the setting for this retrospective evaluation. 31 doctors who remain part of the Whatsapp group were sent an online survey to complete. Quantitative and qualitative feedback were collected and analysed.



Cake to celebrate 1 year of the group



Results:

68% response rate

All members felt the group was supportive
95% felt the group composition, being a group of doctors made it better suited to their needs, relating to their sense of connectedness with like-minded individuals facing similar situations across their professional lives and motherhood.

85% felt that being part of the group improved their mood

80% felt their anxiety was better

90% felt it helped their ability to manage their concerns

Common themes emerged including; practical and emotional support, reduction of isolation, normalisation of worry, a non-judgemental environment, signposting and sharing resources.

57% of the respondents experienced some degree of mental health difficulty in the perinatal period and many felt they were better able to seek help as a result of being part of the group.

Conclusions:

Being part of a social media based Whatsapp group improved the participants' mental health, in particular with regards to mood, anxiety, managing concerns about their children and encouraging help seeking behaviour. Social media as a setting for peer led group support can have a positive impact on the mental well-being of women in the perinatal period.