

Anna, Midwife

'My name is Anna Matthews, Deputy Perinatal Mental Health Midwife at East and North Herts Trust, Lister Hospital. Mental illness can affect any one at any time, but at least one in five women are affected by mental illness during the perinatal period, ONE IN FIVE! Mental illness often affects how women view their pregnancy. They can find themselves struggling with their mood at a time when they expected to feel happy and joyful. Those affected often have a history of mental illness, but for some it comes out of the blue. In a nut shell, my role is to help women enjoy pregnancy and early motherhood as much as they can. I am very passionate about perinatal mental health and feel it is my duty to bring equity into the lives of women experiencing mental illness; mental illness is not equitable.



As a mental health midwife, I am a liaison between women and mental health services; I am their advocate. I am lucky enough to work with the ever-inspiring Rohan McCarty, Lead Perinatal Mental Health Midwife. Rohan absolutely cultivates my passion. Together, we work closely with the Community Perinatal Team in order to identify the correct care pathways for women. Our service is expanding rapidly, we have so many ideas that we can't wait to develop and promote! We have recently developed a pilot clinic for women who may not meet the threshold for mental health services, or women who those services feel would benefit. Within this we work with women developing birth plans together to help support their mental health at the point of delivery. So far, we have received very positive feedback about this service. Women report that we have relieved their anxieties surrounding birth and midwives report the plans really help them support women. Knowing you have been a support to women and helped make a difference is very rewarding. Seeing women experience the benefits of improved mental health is absolutely why we do what we do. It is a true privilege.

Part of my role is communicating how mental illness affects so many in the perinatal period. It is fundamentally important that we break down barriers and reach out to women, really letting them know we are here to help and support them. We want women to know they are not on their own! Additionally, it is important to communicate to maternity staff how to recognise mental illness and give them the tools to help women.

My advice to women and families would be to reach out for help. There is no shame in acknowledging these feelings and talking about it. It is the bravest step they can take, and we will be there to support them. I absolutely do not want to think any women, or their families feel they need to struggle alone. In maternity care we need to ensure that we provide opportunities for women to discuss mental illness and in the right environment. We often talk about how we need to break the stigma of mental health, but as psychologists Anne Cooke and Dave Harper state, 'stigma' evokes feelings of shame or inadequacy, which may arise from a scenario such as losing a job. However, these feelings are as a result of a scenario. They are not the cause. Therefore, they argue that stating there is a need to break the stigma in mental health is in fact an issue of prejudice. This is an interesting thought to leave you with.'