

Befriending services could boost new mothers' mental health

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Credit: University of Stirling

Women experiencing mental health difficulties directly before and after giving birth could benefit from a charity's befriending service, a University of Stirling report has revealed.

The finding emerged from health and social science researchers' independent evaluation of Aberlour Child Care Trust's Perinatal Befriending Support Service, which launched in 2015. The Service helps [new mothers](#) with [mental health](#) issues who are at risk of becoming

socially isolated immediately before and after giving birth.

The report, Aberlour Perinatal Befriending Support Service: An Evaluation of the Pilot Delivery, shows the Service enhances mothers' wellbeing and confidence, has a positive effect on alleviating anxiety and depression, and boosts their self-belief, confidence and attachment to their children.

Helen Cheyne, Professor of Midwifery in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, said: "It's estimated that 30% of women are affected by [mental health issues](#) directly before and after birth, which can have long-term impacts for new mothers and their children.

"Previously, gaps had been identified in the provision of perinatal mental health services and support during this crucial period. Third sector organisations have a vital role in developing innovative services that often fill these gaps as well as breaking down stigma and social isolation. Our assessment of Aberlour's scheme confirms the difference a buddying-style service can make to women's wellbeing."

Aberlour volunteers are trained to provide befriending support and matched with a woman who has been referred to the charity or chosen to take part in the scheme. Volunteers spend up to three hours a week with the family, from just before pregnancy until the child reaches its first birthday.

Describing her experiences with a Service befriender, one woman said: "I think she's made me more resolved to not just be mum, you know.

"I think so many women fall into that trap that they just become mum. They forget who they are as an individual and what their previous life was before – because you do mourn your previous life, I think, to a great extent.

"I don't think a lot of women talk about that and they need to talk about it."

The experts found women who engaged with the charity were less likely to require access more intensive support services.

The researchers also emphasised that finding a good fit between volunteers and families was crucial to the Service's success.

Co-author Professor Brigid Daniel from the University's Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, added: "In our experience, personal contacts and building relationships are central to the success of initiatives that support mothers, infants and families. The Aberlour befriending service is a perfect example of how this has worked in practice."

SallyAnn Kelly, Chief Executive of Aberlour Child Care Trust, said about the service: "Pregnancy and the birth of a baby is exciting but exhausting and no new parent can feel completely in control in a whirlwind of sleepless nights and new worries. For many parents, however, that exhilarating joy of bringing a new life into the world can be submerged in a terrible flood of anxiety, stress and depression.

"At Aberlour, we work to find and help Scotland's hidden children, and their parents. For those parents supported by this service, sometimes they just need a friend. A friend who can listen without judging, who can help without interfering; who can be there when you need them. Our volunteers on the Perinatal Befriending Support scheme are those kind of friends. Vulnerable parents trying to cope with pregnancy and a new baby up and down the country need friends like that."

More information: For more information, see [www.aberlour.org.uk/how we hel ... befriending support](http://www.aberlour.org.uk/how_we_help..._befriending_support)

Provided by University of Stirling

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