

## **Multiple Birth Fathers Experiences of Postnatal Depression (PND)**

### **Thomas's Story**

#### **1. Please tell us a bit about yourself and include the number of multiples and other children you have and if you are married or a single parent etc?**

My name is Thomas and I am 25. My wife and I had MCDA twin boys in May 2016 and they were born 10 weeks early. The thought of having twins as our first children was daunting to say the least but we felt prepared towards the end of the pregnancy (other than the inevitable stress that was looming that was having children!). We weren't however prepared for them being early and the time that was necessary for them to recover in NICU.

It was hard but manageable. Other than the major stresses which included transferring hospitals twice, once before they were born because they didn't have enough beds in the hospital we were at for them in NICU and another to then get closer to home, it wasn't as bad as I first expected. Don't get me wrong, leaving the boys each day was hard and we didn't want to do it – I think my wife struggled more than me – but when we were at the hospital our time was taken with trying to make sure we properly cared for them as best we could e.g. feeding them the small amounts of milk each hour through the tube in their nose and changing their nappies etc.

Honestly though, the time in hospital was the easiest part in my opinion, it was what was going on at home that was difficult. On top of being worried about my wife in hospital (she had some preterm labour issues a week before they were born) there were other stresses going on in my life that were out of my control and were impacting on my ability to cope.

When the boys came home, I let my guard down, I was happy. All the time spent in the hospital though had taken its toll. I was lucky to have a supportive employer who gave me 2 ½ months off of work and I dedicated all the time I had to look after the children, but when they came home my happiness faded. I couldn't face looking at them some days and it was causing a huge amount of strain on my wife. I knew that there was something wrong but I didn't want to take the plunge and go out and get it sorted.

#### **2. How were you diagnosed with PND? Or if you were not diagnosed how did you realise you had it?**

I have a history of depression dating back to when I was at school. I haven't had the best background in terms of event occurring in my life e.g. illness of family and my father dying when I was a baby etc. and I haven't been the type of person that has been able to cope with these problems. In the past I have had numerous amounts of counselling and taken medication and it has always helped at that specific moment in time but obviously hasn't helped to cure the main problem.

I knew the signs to look out for and it was obvious I was struggling with depression again. I was constantly sleepy, finding excuses to stay late at work so that I didn't have to go home, lying to my wife about different things that meant I would stay away from home for extended periods of time and constantly feeling low.

My wife knew something was wrong, but I tried to pass it off as a health issue. I even went to my GP to say I was feeling ill and had blood tests done to try and prove that I was lacking a vitamin or something but they obviously came back clear.

It wasn't until my wife confronted me, pretty hard on, that I admitted out loud for the first time what I was doing and feeling.

I went back to the doctors and this time was truthful and he confirmed that I was suffering from postnatal depression.

### **3. How did you feel at the time, when you were at your lowest point?**

My biggest fear in life is death, it is a strange fear to have, but when you suffer from depression it is quite useful. It means that I don't ever consider trying to do something stupid because I am more scared of death than having to live at home with two screaming children. That isn't to say it didn't cross my mind though and I definitely thought about my fear of death a lot over the months before I sought help. This only exasperated my anxiety and depression and it made me feel scared constantly. Depression is about feeling low but anxiety is a huge part of it for me. I didn't feel like I could cope with my fears or with any of the struggles of parenthood and I contemplated leaving home multiple times – I even ran away for a few hours and didn't come home and considered never returning home again. I just didn't feel myself, and that somebody else was controlling my thoughts and actions.

### **4. What treatment did you have and how effective was it?**

Having been on medication before and knowing that it works but that I can still feel depressed made me very resistant to taking any again. My GP recommended CBT but stated for it to truly work I need to start sorting things out first with the use of medication. I knew he was right and agreed to take Sertraline. It took me at least three weeks to pluck up the courage to taking it consistently – my wife started making sure I had taken it each day.

One of my worst "depressive episodes" occurred within my first week of taking it. I knew that it would take around a month, if not more for the medication to start working but I wasn't giving it the chance it needed and I got even more frustrated.

Luckily I stuck it out and now I feel better. I know that it's early days as I was only diagnosed in September/October 2016. I am pretty convinced that I need a higher dosage but resisting as at the moment I can manage my feelings much better but as time progresses I do wonder. My GP monitors me closely and at the moment we are sticking with what was originally prescribed.

The plan is in the next month or so to start looking into CBT and counselling. I am lucky to have private healthcare that I can use for this and as such will be taking advantage of it to help me improve and ultimately stop this from happening again in the future.

### **5. After your experience, what top tips would you give to other mums or dads who may have PND?**

I certainly knew to a degree what was going on inside me, and I can only assume that others can feel that they are going down a slippery slope too. Your GP is a definite first point of call. PND isn't something that is taboo anymore and they will not turn you away but will listen to

everything you have to say. I would recommend booking a double GP appointment though as those 10 minutes can go very quickly!

My final note, and I don't want to sound sexist or adversarial in anyway, but I do believe that men struggle with the awareness much more. Most men I have spoken to about it don't even recognise PND as a problem that they can have or if they have felt down after having a child have just struck it off as something that is normal. General exposure of this illness is low and more people need to share their experiences.

### **Matt's Story**

My partner and I had our boys a bit later in our lives than we hoped. We have been together for 16 years now and had the boys after 13 years together. I am now 41 and the boys were born when I was 38, and I do wish that I had become a father 10 years earlier when my energy levels would have been a great deal better. The boys are non identical twins and our only children.

I was never formally diagnosed with PND and consequently never had any treatment, but the feelings and emotions I had, were at times overwhelming. I could also see the concern it caused to both our families. No matter how much I thought I was ready or could imagine what life would become like, I don't think anything could have really prepared me. 12 bottles a day, night feeds, endless nappies, such massive responsibilities, fears and loneliness even though my partner and the boys were close, and guilt for causing worry and feeling completely inadequate.

The boys were born in late October and I was on a rota of 45hr weeks and took my turn on call at work, so there was no respite, and total tiredness. I was actually scared of being with the boys on my own and this fear grew and grew. I kept a lid on it for weeks and didn't talk to anyone about what was growing inside which given hindsight would have been a good thing to do, but I often bury my head in the sand. Then one Saturday night when it was my turn to do a night on my own (we often tried to give each other a rest), I broke down and couldn't face the thought of being on my own with the babies. That night my partner stepped in as there was no other option, but it damaged the trust my partner had in me and I think it took months and months for her to feel confidence in me, and even though it was my responsibility for the situation it was exceptionally hard knowing I had let people down.

We are now at a brighter point in our lives, the boys are over three and are progressing well, and it does get easier, not that we could see that at the time! That things would get better was the last thing that we actually wanted to hear but everyone seemed to tell you the same thing. But we can look back and smile now, and are enjoying our two great boys.