

Q&A With Kristina Cowan
Author of *When Postpartum Packs a Punch*

Q. Why did you write the book?

A. When I was going through postpartum depression, I couldn't find a book that offered true, detailed stories from other mothers who'd been where I was. There was plenty of clinical advice, but nothing from peers. What helped me most was the solace I received while talking with other mothers, so I set out to capture that solace in print, and offer it to women for generations to come.

Q. How did you know you were healed?

A. Knowing you're healed is an individual thing, and difficult to describe. I woke up one day when my son was about 15 months old, and I felt the old joy, the old hope, the old sense of purpose I had before he was born. You can't muster those things when you're stuck in a mood disorder, no matter how hard you try. They floated to the top of my mind each day, and I recognized the important parts of my former self were still there.

Q. Why is there a chapter for men?

A. Initially, I had planned a special resources section for men and new dads. As I interviewed more people, the suggestion was there: Interview men, and write a chapter specifically for them. As I was writing, my brother—also a father—sank into a deep depression and never recovered. That someone as strong and successful as him could be devoured by mental illness—it solidified for me how all mental illness is a public health epidemic. Men experience it differently than women do, and they tend not to ask for help, so we're losing them to suicide. The chapter was inspired by my brother and the larger need in our society, to help men at all stages, postpartum and otherwise.

Q. Who else—besides expecting and new mothers—will read the book?

A. Anyone who knows a new or expecting mother is a potential reader. That includes new dads, grandmothers, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, therapists, organizers of groups for new moms, in churches and elsewhere, OB-GYNs, pediatricians, lactation specialists, nurses, especially those who specialize in obstetrics, and labor and delivery, and others who work with new mothers.

Q. How did you research the book?

A. I first set up an outline, likening my book to a meal: my story as the appetizer, the stories of other parents as the main course, and the beverage would be the expert advice and perspectives that flow throughout. I wrote my story first, set up online surveys that yielded parents for interviews, which I mostly conducted by phone, read research papers and reports, and interviewed experts in maternal mental health.

Q. What surprised you during your research?

A. I was floored to discover that so many women had faced some form of postpartum upset—some I'd known for years—but hadn't spoken of it until I shared my experience. I was also fascinated by how far ahead Europe is when it comes to caring for women with perinatal mental illness, particularly the United Kingdom and France.

Those countries aren't not perfect, but their political and health care systems are set up in such a way that makes it easier for families to seek help. And while I've never lived in Europe, the stigma there seems less severe than it is in the United States.

Q. Where do you hope to go from here?

A. I plan to keep writing about mental health and women's health in general. I'd like to delve into the issue of men and suicide, though I'm not sure if that means nonfiction or fiction.

Q. If you had more room in the book, what would you have covered?

A. I would've written more about what it's like for motherless women to have children and face postpartum depression. That issue is closest to my heart—selfishly, because my own mother died when I was 15. Motherless women form a unique sisterhood. We offer each other solace in ways that no one else can.

Q. What do you believe is the most important takeaway from the book?

A. Well, there's more than one, of course—but if readers come away with just one thing, I'd like it to be hope. There are wise, empathetic people capable of helping families who struggle through perinatal mental illness. It might take a while to find them, so you have to persist and be your own best advocate. It's also important for women to listen to their bodies. They never lie. If you don't feel like yourself, and that feeling lingers, chances are it won't go away on its own. Staying quiet won't make it better. Sharing how you feel with someone you trust is the most important step you can take to restoring your mental health. It is not a sign of weakness, as our society often suggests.

Modern medicine has redeeming qualities, but it falls short when it comes to mental illness. There's still so much it gets wrong. For example, research reported on in February 2017 suggests that Pitocin, medication often used to speed labor, increases a woman's chances of postpartum depression between 32 and 36 percent. Those numbers should send medical experts on a quest to more carefully consider the drugs they give to women in labor and postpartum.

Like any art, my book is but a moment in time. Research on maternal mental health will continue. We'll get better at reaching, responding to and caring for struggling families. And we'll face setbacks. My book couldn't cover everything, but I'll continue to build on it through future stories and other coverage I share on my website.