



STRONG WOMEN

# “I stopped breastfeeding and hit the darkest days of my life – why didn’t anyone warn me of the mental health implications?”

BY KATIE SCOTT 3 DAYS AGO



When breastfeeding comes to an end, it should be a liberating rite of passage for any new mum, but when writer Katie Scott stopped, she hit rock bottom. It was only after crying alone in a car park that she found out that lots of her friends had experienced a similar patch of poor mental health after weaning their babies. Here, she chats to experts in the field about why those pesky pregnancy hormones can have such a devastating impact months or years after giving birth, and asks if it's something that can be mitigated.

It was the letter 'g' that always stumped me. I would sit cross-legged, back against the wall and furiously scan the room for an object starting with that letter, getting increasingly irate with the method prescribed to calm me down.

My days had become a challenge to get through. I craved silence and sleep. There were weeks when everything that my children and husband did felt loud, obtrusive and irritating. I pretended to be happy while trying to ignore the pressure building up inside me. It made me feel nauseous, unbalanced and scared. Following another evening when I'd stormed out the door, my husband suggested that I needed to talk to someone. It was this councillor who suggested I work my way through the alphabet in times of distress.

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At the time, my youngest was two years old and we had just stopped breastfeeding. It wasn't a traumatic end, and I didn't feel a bond had been severed. In fact, I felt relieved that she had decided to move on. There was no guilt; it felt seamless. Weeks later, though, my mood started to dip and I hit an absolute low.

Bryony Lewis, founder of breastfeeding keepsake company **T & Belle** and a mother of two, also struggled when her daughter started to wean. “It really hit me, especially as I wasn't expecting any kind of mental health change,” she tells Strong Women. “It was so much more than grieving a past life stage. I felt down all the time. I couldn't motivate myself to do things that we'd been enjoying doing before, like getting out of the house and going to baby groups.”

# “Weeks after starting weening, I hit a low”

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While new mums are warned of the [baby blues](#), the potential for low mood after weaning is less well understood. As one mum shared, it can be exactly the same thing as her. “There’s an element of collision. A lot of the time, babies stop breastfeeding around the time mums are going back to work,” she says. “The time when you feel low is also the time when you are really busy. When there’s a lot of change, we’re not necessarily connecting the dots and considering how our mental health might be related to stopping breastfeeding.”

But the science is there. One [Norwegian study](#) surveyed more than 40,000 breastfeeding women and found a link between the end of breastfeeding and an increased risk of anxiety and depression. Researchers added that women with high levels of anxiety and depression during pregnancy who stop breastfeeding early [before six months post-partum] are “at an additional multiplicative risk for postpartum anxiety and depression”.

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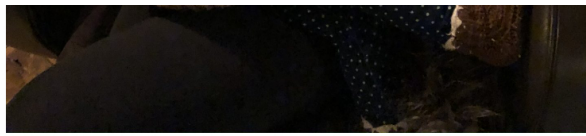
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Awareness about this post-breastfeeding mental decline is increasing as mums share their stories. It's not just about feeling down or stressed; other symptoms include insomnia, weight loss, fatigue, [panic attacks](#) and [brain fog](#). The cause? You know it already: hormonal flux.

Dr Shilpa McQuillan is a community gynaecologist, clinical lead and founder of the [Berkshire Menopause Clinic](#). She explains: “During pregnancy, our levels of oestrogen and progesterone are significantly increased and mainly produced by the placenta. After pregnancy, once the placenta is delivered, these levels drop. Furthermore, breastfeeding lowers oestrogen further because prolactin – the milk producing hormone’ – blocks oestrogen temporarily.”

With low oestrogen levels come a host of symptoms including mood swings, poor sleep, sweats and vaginal dryness. Many of these mimic menopause, she adds. “Low progesterone also leads to low mood and anxiety,” Dr McQuillan continues. “And our cortisol levels rise, which again can have a huge impact on sleep, mood and anxiety.”





When we stop breastfeeding, our body stops producing as much **prolactin and oxytocin** (the 'love hormone' which is also responsible for the milk ejection reflex). Both oxytocin and prolactin can help us feel calm, close and relaxed... so when they both plummet, so too might those positive feelings. And that's on top of the emotional and physical reality of looking after a young child.

After trawling the internet, Lewis joined the dots and realised that this hormonal flux was causing her low mood. Much like me, though, she wishes she had been warned that this might happen before giving birth. "When I came across all these things about hormones, it made me feel better. It confirmed that I wouldn't feel like this forever and that's the most important thing people going through this need to know – it will get better."

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## “Things will get better”

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There isn't a timeframe for recovery as each of us has a different level of hormone sensitivity. In the meantime, however, Dr Ginny Ponsford from the **Women's Hormone Clinic** offers some advice. "To mitigate the impact of the drop in oxytocin and prolactin, try to get regular sleep (which can be difficult with a young baby), reduce caffeine and alcohol consumption, and try to reduce the impact of stress with activities such as exercise, mindfulness or yoga," she advises.

For me, talking about how I was feeling helped hugely. At my lowest, I tried to hide how desperate I was feeling. I remember asking a friend to look after my youngest child while I had a job interview. In reality, I sat in a car park sobbing down the phone to a counsellor. When I finally opened up, I found that so many friends had gone through the same as me. There was a palpable relief as we shared our experiences.

As hormone health gains headlines and the levels of research it deserves, hopefully there will be more information for women as they reach the end of their breastfeeding journey. None of us should feel alone.

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*Images:*

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