



How do Health Visitors understand and support this complex loss?

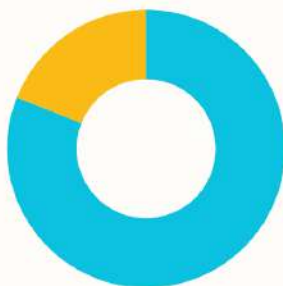
Introduction

In the UK, 80% of women stop breastfeeding before they hoped to¹. When breastfeeding ceases before intended, this may lead to breastfeeding grief - a term that encompasses a wide range of feelings and emotions experienced as a direct loss of feeding intentions, hopes and goals². Health Visitors are well placed to support but there is a lack of guidance and evidence in how health professionals support this complex loss³.

Research

- Local service evaluation in Warwickshire utilising a qualitative critical phenomenological approach
- Service-wide questionnaire undertaken to establish a base level of knowledge and recruit participants
- Two focus groups were conducted, with 11 Health Visitors interviewed and data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis resulting in 6 key themes developed

Yes (81%) No (19%)



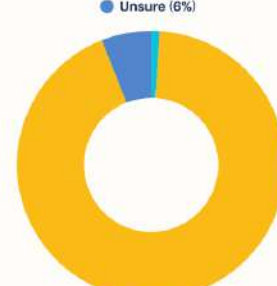
Are you familiar with the term "breastfeeding grief"?

Yes (26%) No (74%)



Is this a term you expressly speak about when supporting parents with feeding their babies?

Yes (1%) No (93%) Unsure (6%)



Have you undertaken any training specifically on breastfeeding grief?

Discussion



- Breastfeeding grief is absent from local and national policy. HVs are not always sure where to look for guidance on supporting families with grief and loss.
- Breastfeeding grief can be hidden and not disclosed as mothers feel judged by others so is not seen by the HV. Some HVs felt parents do not see them as a source of support when breastfeeding stops.



- Supporting breastfeeding grief can trigger personal discomfort in HVs as a result of their own personal experiences.
- HVs reported a climate of disinvestment in services. This lack of capacity results in feelings of failure in their role as they cannot support grief effectively.



- HVs regularly see women experiencing breastfeeding grief but the term felt new and not part of their spoken language with families.
- HVs see themselves as compassionate, sensitive supporters of a mother's emotional distress and want to be able to do more to support breastfeeding grief.

What Next?

Health Visitors identified the following to validate and support breastfeeding grief:

- Universal antenatal contacts for all
- Specific training in breastfeeding grief
- Naming the grief with parents
- Implementation of a package of support and/or optional feeding debrief to explore and support grief

References

- McAndrew et al (2012) Infant Feeding Survey 2010.
- Brown (2019) Why breastfeeding grief and trauma matter.
- Perrins & Drury-Smith (2024) Breastfeeding Grief. Community Practitioner.

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