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CRISIS POINT FOR NEW MUMS

EXCLUSIVE

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Jillian Northwood with her daughter Penelope. Picture: Michael Wilson

“ I thought me going on medication would make me a failure and be bad for the baby. But I learned that’s the best thing I could have done. **Jillian Northwood** ”



Support service unable to meet demand

A support service for new mothers in crisis is unable to meet the demand from WA women experiencing postnatal anxiety and depression.

Professional women who had difficulty adapting to the unpredictable nature of motherhood and those isolated due to the coronavirus pandemic are among the mothers seeking help from Playgroup WA's support network Mother-Baby Nurture.

The early intervention service is at capacity and State co-ordinator Sharon Cooke was concerned for the vulnerable mothers and babies who were turned away.

"What's happening behind closed doors for mothers and babies in those tender first weeks and months together as a family is of serious concern to us," she said.

"Mothers coming to us are feeling distressed, vulnerable and overwhelmed, and some of them have diagnoses of anxiety and depression."

Ms Cooke said some babies showed signs of distress and vulnerability, such as gaze avoidance, difficulty regulating their state and trouble sleeping or feeding, at the start of the course.

"Over the 10 week period, we see some remarkable transformations occurring," she said.

The program seeks to strengthen the bond between mother and baby, reduce social isolation and alleviate symptoms of postnatal anxiety and depression.

Ms Cooke has been working with mothers and infants for 25 years and had recently observed successful professional women struggling with the huge "psychological reorganisation" that motherhood demanded.

"The very skills that make us competent and effective in the workplace may not translate into the care giving role of a parent," she said.

"Being task-oriented and productive and performance-oriented when you become a mother — if you hold that mindset it can be quite anxiety inducing, overwhelming and depressive."

Ms Cooke said it could lead to women feeling like failures.

"Motherhood requires such flexibility and focus on relationships and not on the task, and it's not something we have practised," she said.

Ms Cooke said reduced contact with child health nurses, due to the closure of drop-in centres and fewer scheduled appointments, also left WA families vulnerable.

Playgroup WA's chief executive David Zarb said it was estimated that 7000 WA mothers each year were experiencing perinatal anxiety and depression.

He said there was growing evidence that challenges experienced in adulthood, including mental health issues, stemmed from the first 1000 days of a baby's life.

"We are trying to get people to understand . . . the foundational relationship stuff is like sunshine — if you're not getting it, you're not going to grow as well as you might have otherwise grown," Mr Zarb said.

"It's putting kids behind the eight ball before they start."

Perth mother Jillian Northwood sought help for anxiety that manifested after a miscarriage and was referred to Mother-Baby Nurture by a psychiatrist when she was pregnant with daughter Penelope, now 17 months.

"I didn't enjoy my pregnancy because I was having panic attacks all the time," Mrs Northwood said.

"I started to have scary thoughts, which I now know were intrusive thoughts.

"I thought me going on medication would make me a failure and be bad for the baby.

"But I learned that's the best thing I could have done and it allowed me to be the best kind of mum."

Mrs Northwood, who is pregnant with her second child, said with the support of Mother-Baby Nurture, she was relishing motherhood and was passionate about sharing her experience, and the fact pregnancy "is not perfect for everyone."

Mother of two Amie Parsons had moments in the first few months of first-time motherhood when she felt she was falling apart.

After benefiting from the program four years ago with son Bodhi, Mrs Parsons, 30, returned last year when daughter Thea was born.

"It's so easy to feel so lost and scared, and whilst your family and friends are well-intentioned, they are also quite busy and I didn't really have the space to express what I was going through," she said.

"Mother-Baby Nurture was a safe space to express my troubles and to know I wasn't on my own."

The State Government has funded the Mother-Baby Nurture program until June next year and Mr Zarb hoped it would be continued — and expanded — to help more families.

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