

Staying Resilient During the First Year

Myths of Motherhood

There are many misconceptions or myths about motherhood.

The image of the perfect, happy and composed mother with the settled, sleeping baby portrayed in the media, popular culture and advertisements creates a standard for new mums that is unrealistic.

The reality is that motherhood can look and feel very different to what we expected. Subscribing to these myths of motherhood can make the adjustment even more challenging and have a negative impact on our mental health. It can lead to mums being overly worried or critical of themselves, adding to feelings of stress, anxiety and low mood.

Reflecting on your own beliefs regarding motherhood, and consider whether you are holding on to any myths. Are your beliefs setting you up for success or failure? Consider which ideas are worth questioning or challenging. One way we can stay resilient when adjusting to parenthood is keeping our expectations realistic.

Here are some common myths of motherhood:

- Mums bond with their baby immediately
- Mothering comes naturally
- Mothers should always be calm, grateful and confident
- Motherhood is to be embraced and celebrated in its entirety
- A good mum knows how to 'do everything' and balance it all
- A good mum is always available to her child
- Mums like their kids all the time
- Breast is best - breastfeeding is 'natural' and therefore it comes 'naturally'
- Children need 100% of our time; A mother is selfish if she expresses her own needs, interests and desires
- Asking for help is a sign of weakness

Managing the Worrier, the Perfectionist, and the Inner Critic

The first year of parenthood is one of the most challenging. Even though it does eventually pass, there are some things we can do to stay resilient.

The way we **think** has a strong influence on how we **feel** and **behave** - so it's important we keep our thinking clear and balanced. To do this, we need to be aware of when our thinking becomes unhelpful. Three unhelpful thinking styles that new mums commonly experience are: The Worrier, The Perfectionist, and the Inner Critic. Challenging unhelpful thinking helps us cope with difficult situations.

The Worrier



Worrying is a normal process. It can be helpful in small doses, as it helps us stay focussed and take action.

However, it is important to notice when our worry becomes unhelpful - we call this 'The Worrier'. This is when worry becomes constant, difficult to control and distressing.

The Worrier is often preoccupied with things outside of our control, and situations that are unlikely to happen. The Worrier is often quick to think of the worst case scenario. One way to spot the Worrier is if you are having a lot of thoughts starting with 'what if...'. Excessively checking the baby is another sign that the Worrier may be present.

CHALLENGING THE WORRIER:

Try writing down all of your worries. Split them into two groups: Things within your control, and things outside of your control. Work on the things that you can do something about, and work on letting go of the things you can't.

STATEMENTS TO CHALLENGE THE WORRIER:

- Uncertainty is a part of life which needs to be accepted. We can only do the best we can with what we have.
- Every baby is an individual. All children develop at their own pace and their own way.
- Babies who are bottle fed are just as healthy as babies who are breastfed.
- A mother may feel love for her baby as soon as it is born, but it may take weeks or even months to bond with your baby. No matter however long it takes, it's alright.
- Ask yourself: Am I worrying about things that are unlikely? Or outside of my control?
- Ask yourself: Is this worry helping me take action or is it causing me distress?

The Perfectionist



Straining to meet extremely high, unrealistic standards is characteristic of 'The Perfectionist'.

The Perfectionist feels a sense of guilt or failure when mistakes are made, and often has strict, inflexible rules about how things should be done. One way to spot the Perfectionist is if you are having thoughts such as 'I should...', 'I must...'. The Perfectionist often sees things in black or white - things are either great or terrible, we are either winning or losing. The Perfectionist is present when we focus on our shortcomings and disregard our accomplishments.

CHALLENGING THE PERFECTIONIST:

Motherhood is not something that comes naturally - women need to learn how to be mother, which takes time and practice. No one rides a bike perfectly the first time, there are bumps, wobbles and falls along the way.

STATEMENTS TO CHALLENGE THE PERFECTIONIST:

- You are allowed to make mistakes, you are allowed to be less than perfect.
- Mistakes are opportunities to learn and improve.
- There is no such thing as the perfect mother and partner - most people do the best with their own unique circumstances.
- Babies don't remember single mistakes or when we have off days here and there - what is more important for development is an overall pattern of presence and warmth.
- You don't need to do everything on your own - support and help is available. It is okay to ask to seek help for big or small things.
- Ask yourself: Would I place the same expectations on a friend in the same situation?

The Inner Critic



More often than not, we are our own harshest critic - we can call this the 'Inner Critic'.

The Inner Critic likes to compare us to others and make us feel inadequate. If the Inner Critic had a catchphrase, it would be 'I'm not good enough'. The Inner critic amplifies the negatives, and minimises our positive contributions and efforts. You can spot the Inner Critic if you are having thoughts where we label ourselves, such as 'I'm an idiot, 'I'm hopeless'. The Inner Critic tends to place all the blame on us, even in situations where we are not entirely responsible.

CHALLENGING THE INNER CRITIC:

Practicing being patient and compassionate towards yourself, and speaking to yourself with respect. If this doesn't come naturally to you - consider how you would speak to a friend who was going through a difficult time.

STATEMENTS TO CHALLENGE THE INNER CRITIC:

- Mothers need support and have the right to ask for it.
- Motherhood involves both joy and distress. You are not alone.
- Motherhood is a difficult and rewarding job that involves working long hours with little respite.
- Ask yourself: Are there positive contributions and efforts of mine that I am ignoring?

Getting support

If you are noticing your difficulties have persisted for longer than 2 weeks, are getting worse over time, or are making it hard to complete everyday tasks and care for your baby - these are signs that more support is needed.

There is no need to suffer alone, help is available. It's best to act early for your and your family's wellbeing.

- Find a professional trained in perinatal mental health via the e-COPE directory: www.cope.org.au/e-cope-directory/search/
- Find a child health centre via Pregnancy Birth & Baby: www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/child-health-centres
- Find a health professional or health service via BeyondBlue: www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/find-a-professional

Additional Services

- PANDA supports women and their families who are suffering perinatal anxiety or depression
1300 726 396
www.panda.org.au

- Gidget Foundation supports the emotional wellbeing of expecting and new parents
1300 851 758
www.gidgetfoundation.org.au
- Healthy Families (BeyondBlue) provides information and support to parents, guardians and families, and support for mental health and wellbeing
1300 224 636
www.healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au
- Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE) provides support for the emotional challenges of becoming a parent
www.cope.org.au
- What Were We Thinking (WWWT; Monash University) provides information and resources for new parents
www.whatwerewethinking.org.au