

Giving hope to parents

The Gidget Foundation has opened its third facility on the North Shore, helping to heal the one in five new mothers - and one in 10 fathers - burdened with mental health issues.

By Jenny Byrne

When the birth of a child becomes a living nightmare instead of a life-affirming, beautiful experience, those suffering often feel ashamed - keeping their intense feelings bottled up.

However, North Shore locals are seeking help from Gidget, and not-for-profit foundation that treats depression and anxiety, and raises awareness that this is a huge issue affecting a high percentage of new families.

Named after a North Shore mother who suffered postnatal depression and tragically took her own life, her family and friends vowed no-one else should suffer in silence in the same way.

In 2014, they created the Gidget Foundation, which has now helped over 1400 families to overcome crippling mental health issues.

Last month, the foundation opened a new facility in the maternity ward at North Shore Private Hospital in St Leonards



Mother-of-one Olivia Mullan was diagnosed with a severe case of perinatal anxiety and decided to seek help from North Shore-based Gidget House.

- its fifth in Sydney alongside Gidget House in North Sydney, one at the Mater Hospital in Crows Nest, and one each in Merrylands and Randwick.

Staffed by psychologists and midwives, the facility offers free counselling to both mums and dads experiencing mental health issues as a result of pregnancy, childbirth or parenthood.

Clients are either pregnant, already parents or bereaved parents experiencing perinatal depression, postnatal depression, postnatal anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Postnatal depression or other mental health issues affect one in five women and one in 10 men who've become parents," says Dr Inge Martin, a Gidget psychologist.

"Whether a woman gets postnatal depression or anxiety can in a lot of cases depend on whether she has a history of previous mental health issues or miscarriages," she explains.

"Other factors that can contribute can be if she's under

stress at work, in her relationship, with money or other children issues, or if she's having feeding or health issues with the baby."

Dr Martin says the North Shore demographic of women adds to the likelihood. "Some women from this area who are high-achieving, hardworking and success driven think the success of their motherhood is dependent on the amount of effort they put in. These women can often fall harder and expect too much of pregnancy and motherhood."

After successful IVF, North Shore mother and nurse Olivia Mullan gave birth to her son William, now three. But when he was six weeks old, she became convinced he was going to die.

"I was in the high-risk category for postnatal depression - I went through IVF, was an older mother and a high-achieving professional. I would imagine finding William blue and not breathing in the cot," she reveals.

"From there, my anxiety escalated, with me imagining falling and dropping him or accidentally drowning him in the bath."

Uncontrollable crying, panic, shaking and not eating or sleeping were all signs: Olivia was diagnosed with a severe case of perinatal anxiety. She was admitted to St John of Good Hospital's Mother and Baby Unit in Burwood.

After her three-week hospital stay, Olivia started weekly sessions at Gidget where the psychologist "gave me tools to deal with the anxiety, like letting the negative thoughts wash over me, literally putting my feet on the ground to 'ground



Gidget psychologist Dr Inge Martin says women who have had IVF, are older mothers and are high-achieving professionals are in the high-risk category for post-natal depression.

myself' and bring me back to reality, and making lists of pros and cons of certain feelings. I also found out this anxiety is the result of a hormone imbalance that happens in a certain percentage of mothers.

"Before I went to Gidget, I had to watch William 24 hours a day. Now, I no longer wrap him up in cotton wool and he's a normal little boy who I'm delighted to see climbing trees and doing all the things a normal little boy would. I'm totally

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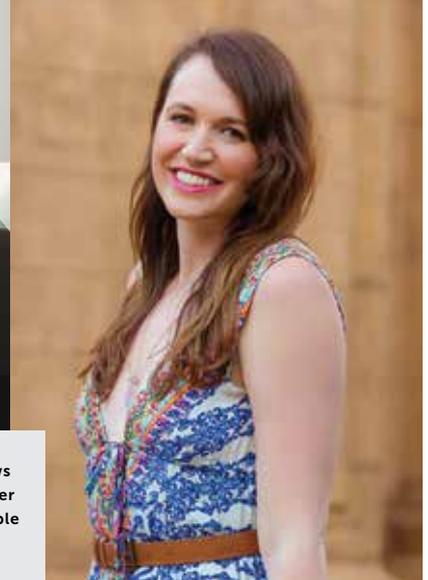
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DR BEN WILCOX
 BDS (Ncle), MJDF RCS (Eng),
 Grad Dip Clin Dent
 (Oral Implants) (Syd)



DR JAMES COOKE
 BSc (Anat) (UQ), MBA Int
 (Griffith), BDent (Hons)
 (Syd), Grad Dip Clin Dent
 (Oral Implants) (Syd)



Fast facts

- 20% of new mothers are affected by depression and anxiety and the difficulties of early parenting.
- 10% of new fathers experience some degree of mental health illness in association with parenthood.
- Over 100,000 families every year are affected.
- Over 50% of new parents will experience adjustment disorders.
- Gidget has helped 1,400 families.

Willoughby local Jodie Matthews needed Gidget's counselling after she experienced the unimaginable pain of her son being stillborn.

After getting a GP referral, she saw Gidget's psychologist Christine Barnes. "She listened to me and helped me work through my grief. She let me know it was okay to feel whatever was coming up, whether that be anger, sadness or frustration. I feel okay crying each day as I know each tear I shed is helping me heal.

"I'm now still getting used to my new 'normal' - to grieve and work through all my feelings. There's no right or wrong when it comes to dealing with loss - whether that's through miscarriage, stillbirth or infant loss.

"I do believe we all need to talk about this more as, when this happened to me, I felt so isolated and alone. Our society almost finds it too painful to talk about.

"If I can give one piece of advice it is: please don't be afraid to speak up. There are wonderful support groups and organisations like Gidget House who are here to help." **N**

relaxed about that."

North Shore Private is one of two hospitals to run the Gidget Foundation Australia Emotional Wellbeing Program, a screening program enabling expectant women, booked to have their baby there, to have an antenatal emotional health check.

Some will then participate in a one-on-one appointment with one of the 15 trained Gidget midwives to explore their emotional wellbeing and discuss concerns regarding the potential for postnatal depression and anxiety. Those who need specialist support as a result of the screening will be offered free psychological sessions at the hospital.

Jodie Matthews from Willoughby needed Gidget's counselling after she experienced the unimaginable pain of her son being stillborn. "I was 38 weeks when something didn't feel right and an ultrasound revealed our little boy had no heartbeat," she says.

"This was our worst nightmare - it was like our world came crashing down around us in one moment. Just over 25 hours later, I gave birth to our son, Hamish. The only thing missing from the birthing suite was the cries of our boy. Unfortunately, he got wrapped in the cord and it cut off his blood supply."



Olivia Mullan with son William, now three, is a happy mum after receiving support from the Gidget Foundation.