

Impacts of Covid-19 on perinatal mental health focus for National Awareness Week

- **A staggering 90% of parents said their level of worry or concern had increased since COVID-19 started, a 9% increase on the previous year**
- **Over half (54%) of parents reported their biggest concern was experiencing increased anxiety and depression**
- **This Perinatal Mental Health Week (7 – 13 November), Gidget Foundation Australia is encouraging Aussies to take care of each other as we enter a post pandemic world and where new and expectant parents can reach out for support if they need it**

EMBARGO: 7th November: In the midst of a turbulent year the nation's mental health has taken a collective hit, and it's more important than ever for Aussies who are struggling to be seen and heard. Expectant and new parents have it especially tough, with pregnancy and parenting being a 24/7 gig it can be difficult to remember to take time for themselves – or even check in on their own mental health.

New research from Gidget Foundation Australia reveals a staggering 90% of parents said their level of worry or concern had increased since COVID-19 started, a 9% increase on the 2020 data. In fact, over half (54%) of parents reported their biggest concern was experiencing increased anxiety and depression.

The isolation of living in lockdown, not being able to have visitors and share the experience of being a new parent has impacted significantly on many expectant and new parents and seeing friends and family is what they have missed most during lockdown.

Tammy Hewitt had her baby Indie in 2020 at the height of the pandemic and says the experience wasn't easy at all. "You spend your whole life looking forward to being a mum and a parent but suddenly there are all these unexpected restrictions to navigate. I had to come up with a schedule for hospital visits as you were only allowed one visitor per a day. That might sound minor, but it was really tough trying to share a wonderful moment with my partner and my family but feeling really alone at the same time."

Perinatal mental health is a broad yet complex term and can carry a stigma which prevents people from talking about it or accessing help. One in five mothers and one in ten fathers will experience perinatal depression and anxiety, this is almost 100,000 expectant and new parents in Australia each year.

Clinical Psychologist, Chris Barnes, said that its important people are mindful in how they interact with new parents and their babies as states open up and restrictions are lifted. "Everyone is adjusting in their own way to this new normal, so it's vital that we follow parent's and baby's cues. Don't assume parents are comfortable handing baby over straight away.

"New parents need space to settle in even more now so it's crucial that we continue to keep the health of the baby and parents in mind. Remember hygiene and sanitising hands are the first line in stopping the spread of COVID-19 and Baby is new to this world and will have spent their whole life in their bubble, it's essential we start off slow," she said.

NSW Minister for Mental Health, Regional Youth and Women, The Hon Bronnie Taylor MLC, said "Perinatal Mental Health Week comes at the end of a tough year for Australians, with parents especially having had a lot of obstacles to overcome. Mental health is invisible, therefore it is impossible to understand from an outsider's point of view. What we can do, is understand that we don't all fit into the same box. We are opening a conversation that could have a huge positive impact of people's daily lives."

CEO of Gidget Foundation Australia, Arabella Gibson said that all parenting journeys look different with each person's experience being individual and unique. "Perinatal mental health does not discriminate and the reasons behind its prevalence are not always clear cut or easily explained. It's important to acknowledge that it doesn't matter why you are feeling this way, just that you are not alone, and you can and will get through it with the right supports.

"Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, we at Gidget Foundation Australia have experienced a 127% surge in demand for our free psychological counselling services. Furthermore, we've noted a significant increase in website visitors and social media engagement, indicating an increased need for support for expectant and new parents," Ms Gibson said.

Tammy recalls talking is what helped her to overcome the difficulties she was facing, "Once I started talking about how I was feeling I was more aware of it and therefore able to manage it better. By having trust in myself and trust in my instincts, it made me realise that I was more than capable of dealing with any situation I may come up against. I believe it is really important to show emotion in front of our children as that is the best way to break down the stigma for them and consequently for the next generations."

This Perinatal Mental Health Week, Gidget Foundation Australia is the lead agency coordinating 42 organisations across the perinatal mental health sector to support new and expectant parents, so they know no matter who they are or where they live, help is available. Visit pmhweek.org.au for more.

Ms Gibson concludes, "Every conversation that we collectively start with the broader community is an opportunity to demystify the experiences of expectant and new parents across Australia.

"With the help of our partners, we can create a footprint of positivity not just for people at risk of mental health challenges during pregnancy and early parenthood, but also for the people around them looking for sources of support for the people they love," she said.

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About Gidget Foundation Australia

Previously known as postnatal depression, perinatal anxiety and depression during pregnancy and early parenthood (the perinatal period) affects almost 100,000 Australians each year, equating to 1 in 5 new mums and 1 in 10 new dads. Gidget is the nickname of a vibrant young mother from Sydney who took her own life while suffering from unrecognised postnatal depression. She hid her suffering even from her loving family and friends. They created the Gidget Foundation, determined that what happened to Gidget would not happen to others.

Today, Gidget Foundation Australia assists thousands of expectant parents and their families each year and provides psychological services to parents in need through its Gidget House face-to-face services (at an expanding number of locations), its Start Talking telehealth program and Emotional Wellbeing antenatal screening programs conducted through participating hospitals.

Gidget Foundation Australia is a not-for-profit organisation, supported by the community, the corporate sector, the medical profession, the NSW and Commonwealth Governments, and the media.

About Perinatal Mental Health Week

Perinatal Mental Health Week (PMHW) takes place annually in November – a national week to raise awareness, provide information, referral pathway support and de-stigmatise perinatal mental health. Organisations involved in Perinatal Mental Health Week 2021 are Antenatal & Postnatal Psychology Network, Australian

Fatherhood Research Consortium, AFRC, Australasian Birth Trauma Association, Bears of Hope, Belmont Private Hospital, Birthing Dads, Centre for Perinatal Psychology, COPE, Dads Group, DadSpace, Gidget Foundation Australia, Healthy Male Andrology Australia, Jean Hailes for Women's Health, Karitane, Little Sparklers, Mum Space, PANDA, Parent-Infant Research Institute, Peach Tree, Perinatal Wellbeing Centre, The Pink Elephants Support Network, Possums & Co, Pregnancy Birth & Baby, Radiance, Sids and Kids, SMS4dads, St John of God, Still Aware, Stillbirth Foundation Australia, The Marcè Society, This Way Up, Tresillian and Tweddle.

Each day of Perinatal Mental Health Week will have a theme:

- **Day One:** Stigma, and the myth of the 'perfect parent'
- **Day Two:** COVID-19 and the ongoing impact of the pandemic on the emotional wellbeing of expectant and new parents
- **Day Three:** LGBTQI exploring the different types of family units, same sex conception, stigma and accessing support
- **Day Four:** First Nations and Cultural Diversity
- **Day Five:** Dads and non-birthing partners
- **Day Six:** Regional, rural and remote expectant and new parents
- **Day Seven:** Grief and loss, infertility, IVF, stillbirth, miscarriage, TFMR
- **Day Eight:** How to access support through the Perinatal Mental Health Week partner organisations.

About the research

A COVID-19 survey was conducted in May 2020 during the initial lockdown period. Several states have once again been challenged by a new outbreak of the virus and subsequent prolonged lockdown in 2021. Therefore, GFA have conducted another survey to further understand the needs of expectant and new parents and analyse any shift in responses compared to 2020.

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