**Self-Compassion: the key to overcoming the fear of a new identity as a mother**

Cindy Cranswick (M.Phil, B.Couns, MACA)

University of Notre Dame - Fremantle

cindy.cranswick@nd.edu.au

**Abstract**

Anthropologists refer to the process of becoming a mother as “matrescence”. It is a transition that has been overlooked and under-explored. Research in this life transition has mainly been focused on the development and outcomes for the baby and not on the exploration of the mother’s experience. For many women, the transition to motherhood and the identity crisis that comes with it can have a significant impact on their well-being and mental health. It has been said that giving birth to a new identity as a mother can be as challenging as giving birth to a baby. Recent research into the role of self-compassion in the perinatal period identified one of the major causes of emotional and psychological suffering in this transition to motherhood was the “loss of identity”. Although identities are recreated many times in life, becoming a mother is often cited as the most challenging. It requires the acceptance of a new identity and an adjustment to the transition of becoming a caregiver. Some of the challenges faced in creating and accepting this new identity have been identified as a loss of; independence, social identity, and physical self. For mothers, this often results in decreased self-esteem, feelings of negative self-worth, increased levels of self-criticism and judgement. These negative views cause a high level of emotional distress that can lead to anxiety and depression in the perinatal period impacting negatively on the motherhood experience. There is a growing body of evidence to support findings that self-compassion is an important source of emotional and psychological well-being during major life transitions. Self-compassion is a skill that can be learnt. The three elements of self-compassion as defined by Neff (2012); self-kindness, mindfulness and common humanity can provide useful skills to help women create a meaningful motherhood identity.

*Keywords: perinatal, anxiety, depression, identity, self-compassion.*