

Mother's Day Letters: A Novel Mother to New Mother Initiative to Tackle Maternal Anxiety

**Professor Virginia Schmied, Dr Elaine
Burns, Professor Hannah Dahlen,
School of Nursing and Midwifery &
A/Prof Kate Huppertz, School of Social
Science, Western Sydney University,
Australia**

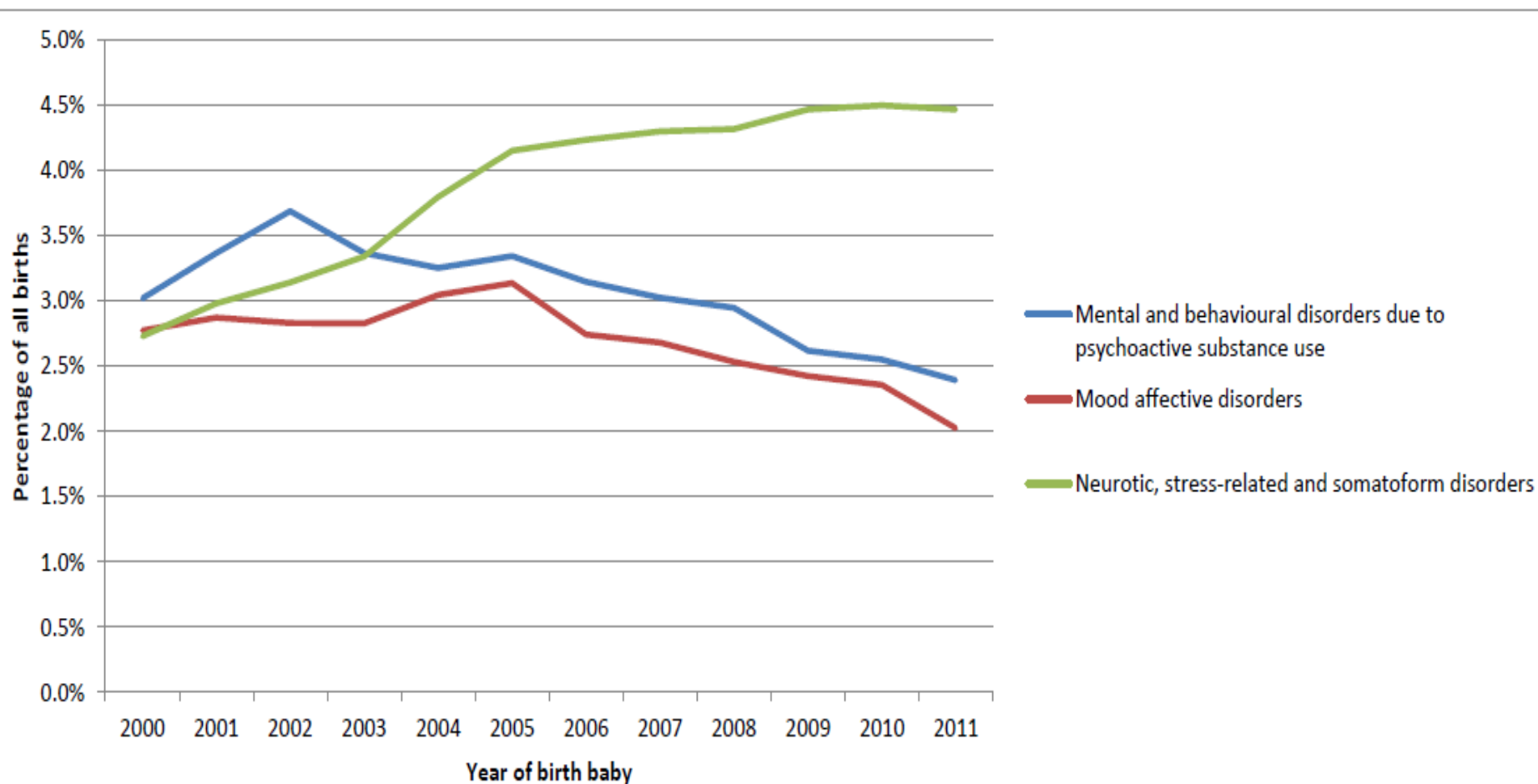


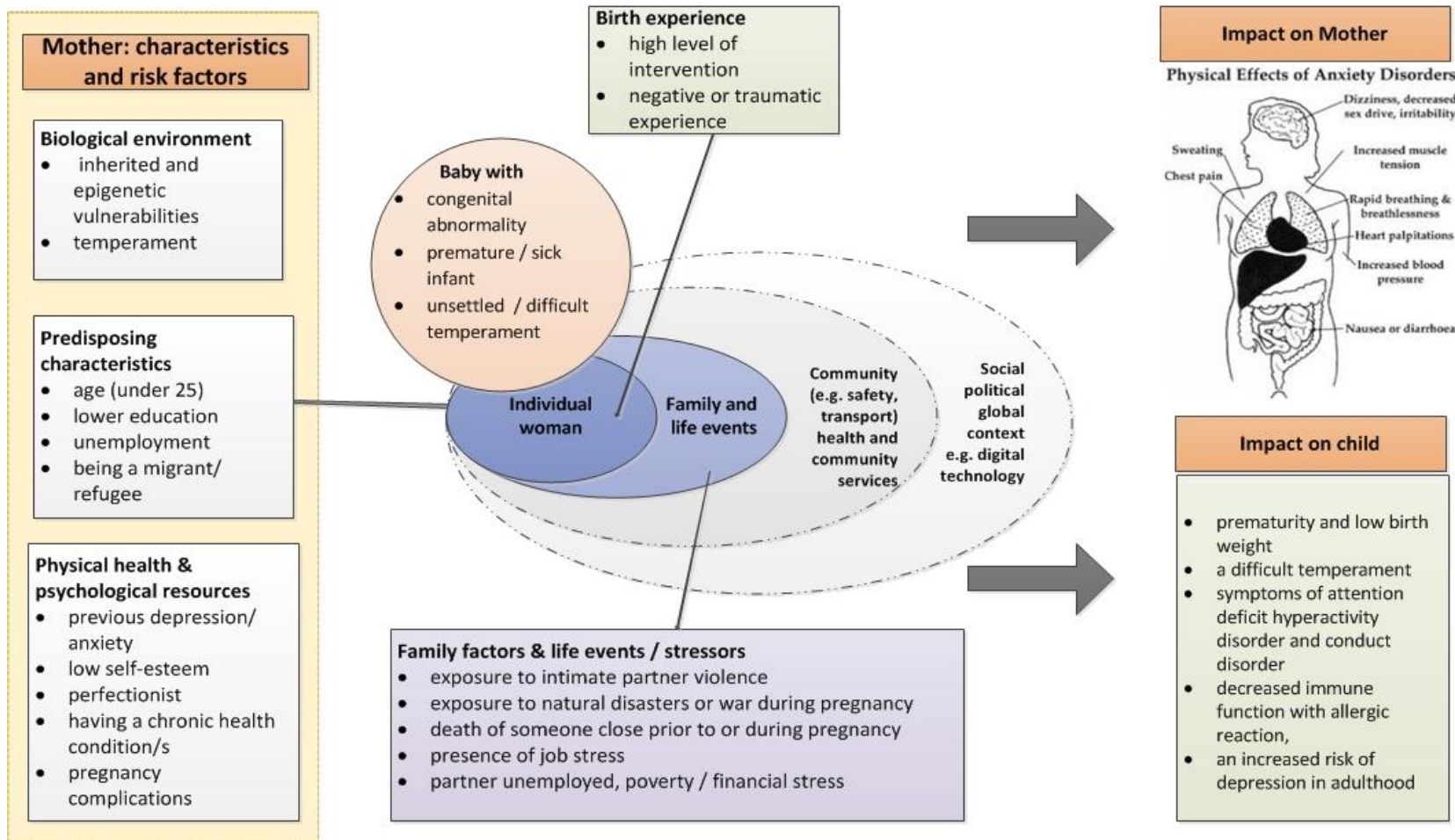
Perinatal mental health in Australia

- 300,000 women birth each year
- 1 in 5 will experience mental health morbidity & anxiety appears to be increasing
- Prevalence of anxiety symptoms fluctuates across pregnancy from approximately 18% in first trimester to 25% in the third trimester
- The prevalence of anxiety disorders in the year following birth is estimated to be 20% (with high rates of comorbidity).
- Over 50% of women who seek admission to a Residential Parenting Service report symptoms of depression and or anxiety.



Is anxiety increasing?



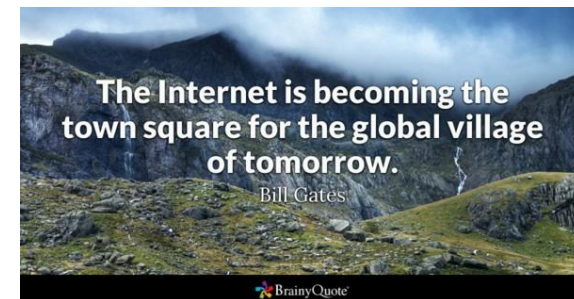
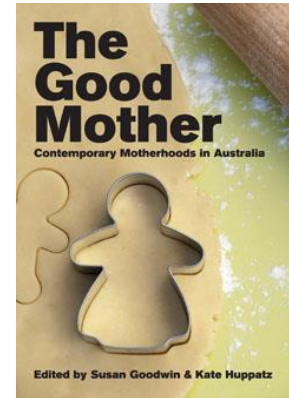
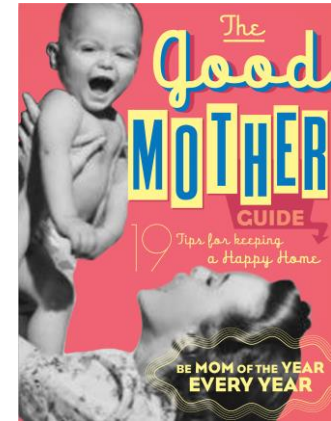


[Tackling Maternal Anxiety: Reconceptualising Mothering Narratives](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1483885/Maternal_Anxiety_White_Papers_FINAL.pdf)

[https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ data/assets/pdf file/0010/1483885/Maternal Anxiety White Papers FINAL.pdf](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1483885/Maternal_Anxiety_White_Papers_FINAL.pdf)

Why is maternal anxiety so high?

- Increased community awareness of mental health concerns
- increased surveillance by health professionals of mental health issues in the perinatal period
- a fragmented maternity and child health system
- a health system that is risk averse with high levels of intervention
- raised expectations aligned to notions of the 'good' mother
- Work pressures, financial pressures
- Information overload associated with ↑ social media and digital technology.

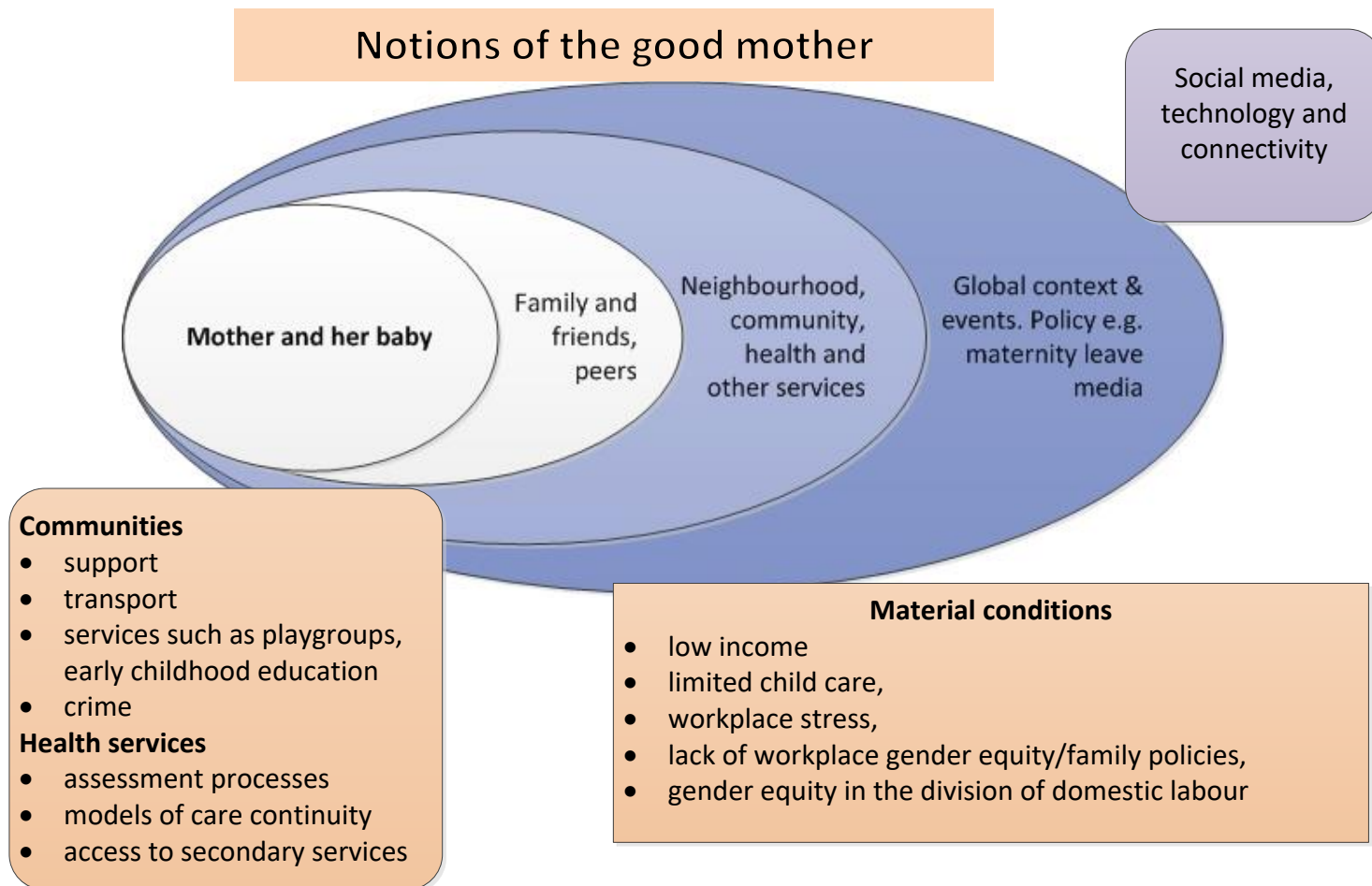




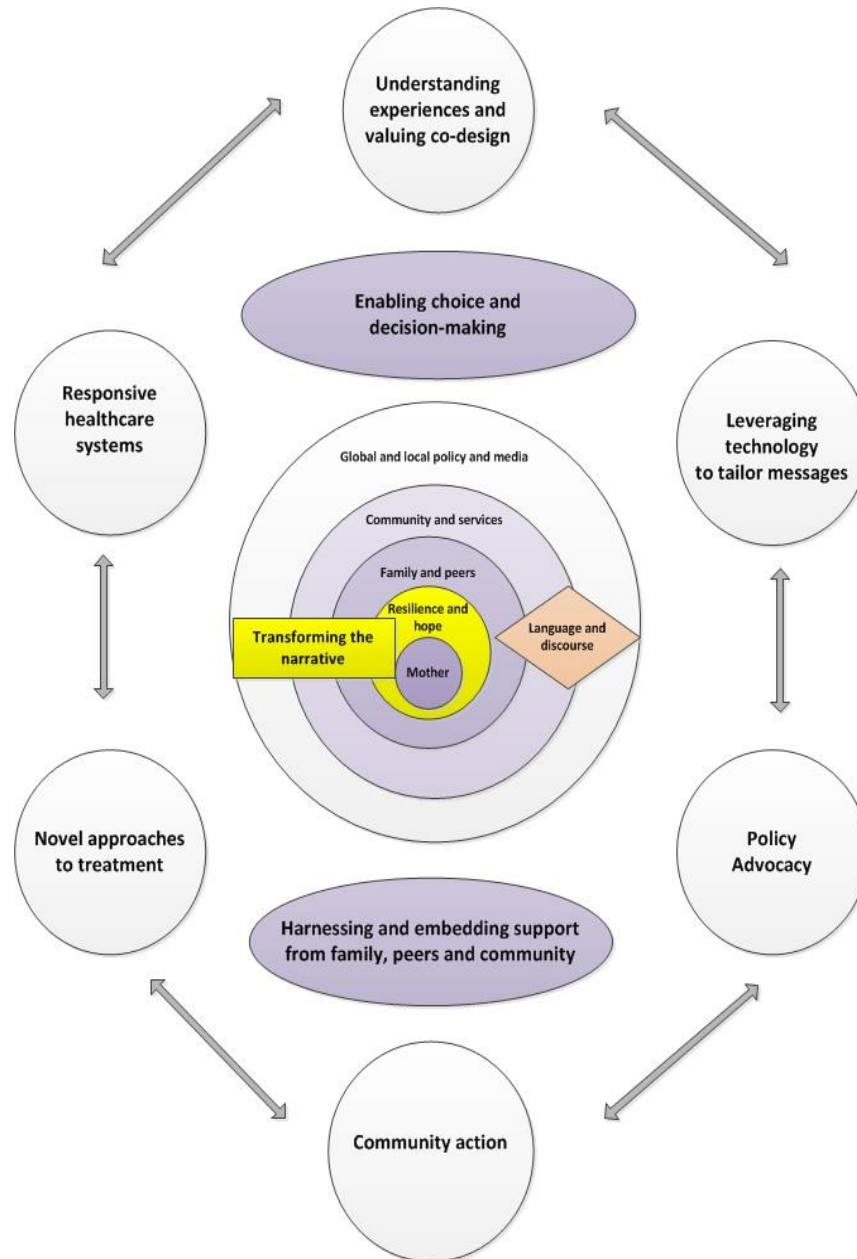
Watched and judged by self and others



Areas for further understanding



Action plan to transform mothering narratives



Community action

- **Mother's Day letters project**
- Mockingbird project
- Mother Infant Caring Communities



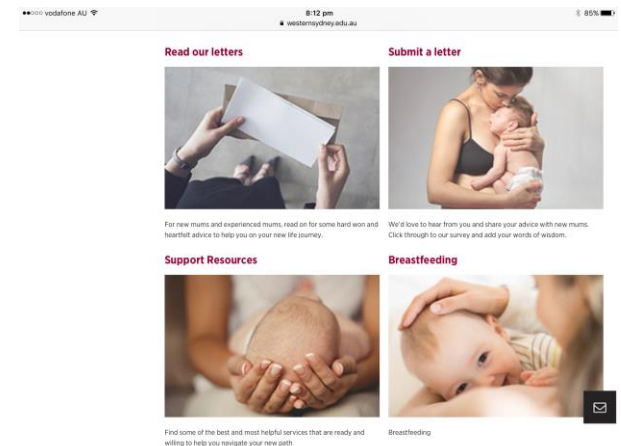
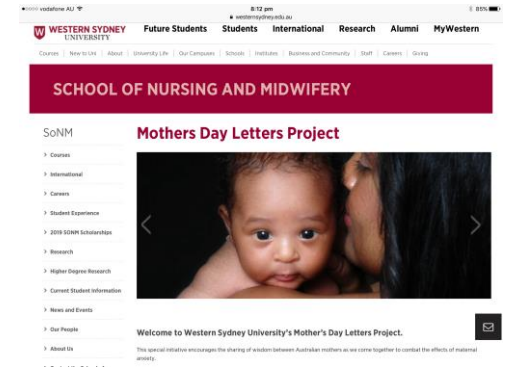
Mothers Day Letters

The *Mother's Day Letters* project – Western Sydney University brings mums' words of support to new mothers

Western Sydney University is reaching out to Australian mothers and asking them to share their insights and wisdom on navigating the early days of motherhood with the launch of the *Mother's Day Letters* project.

As part of the campaign, letters were hand delivered to new mums at Westmead Hospital on Mother's Day, May 13th 2018

westernsydney.edu.au/mothersdayletters.



Top ten tips

Mother's Day May 2019 in partnership with Stockland Delivered to 5 maternity units



Constructing letters: Opening words

264 letters (70 hand written)

- Mothers aged between 23 to 80 years;
- 75% under 40:
- 2018 - 85% Australian born
- 2019 - 70% Australian born

Messages of congratulations, support and positive appraisal

- **“You have just done the most amazing thing.”;**
- **“You are awesome”, “You are magnificent”**
- **“You are a legend”**

***To a beautiful new mum,
This letter comes filled with love and strength for
you as you start this amazing journey of
motherhood....***

Constructing letters: Opening words

Congratulations!!!

You have done an incredible job, stay strong, I know you're exhausted and feeling overwhelmed but your journey has just begun. Only someone as strong and determined as you could have carried and delivered a life into this world. You are INCREDIBLE. Enjoy and embrace every coming moment ahead. Be easy and kind to yourself. You are AMAZING.



***But
responsibility...
You are brave
and you are in a
position to be
the most
positive leader
in your child's
life***

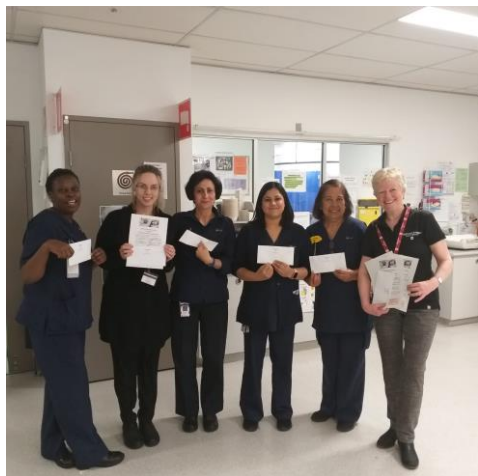
Motherhood: idealised

To me, Motherhood is so precious....it's about enjoying every moment of life & making the most of the special times we share together. Making beautiful memories that will stay in our hearts & minds forever. I believe that is oh so important. Holding hands whilst walking along the street, watching the sun rise & fall and counting the stars in the night sky too. Isn't life so precious?



Motherhood: It's a privilege

Being a mum is an honour,
a privilege, a never ending
test but most importantly a
unique experience that I
encourage you to celebrate
and enjoy! (201)



*It's a privilege to be a Mum
Its a love like no other
A bond of time
A sacrifice of self
But a payment in return
And the
Great GrandMum
The Nana Mum
And the current Mum can all
be grateful*

*Its a privilege to be a Mum
(171)*



Cherish the moment

You will never have this moment again this is precious

This is something I wish I had paid more attention to with my first baby. Despite the exhaustion, the never-ending feeds, puke and nappy changes, this is a precious time for your new little family. Savour the snuggles and take the selfies (you'll wish you had later). 35

Cherish every moment, the house work can wait All the best and Happy Mother's Day Xx Letter 54

You are all your baby needs

Those first four months are all about feeding, sleeping and loving. Don't fit into routines or expectations. Listen to your baby. Their needs will guide you. You are amazing. You are definitely enough. And you are all your baby needs (37)

The love, the joy, the constant worry

Congratulations and welcome to the club. The club of Mothers who know what it is to have your heart walking around in someone else's body. We all know it; the panic, the fear, the love, the joy, the pain, the doubt, the constant worry.

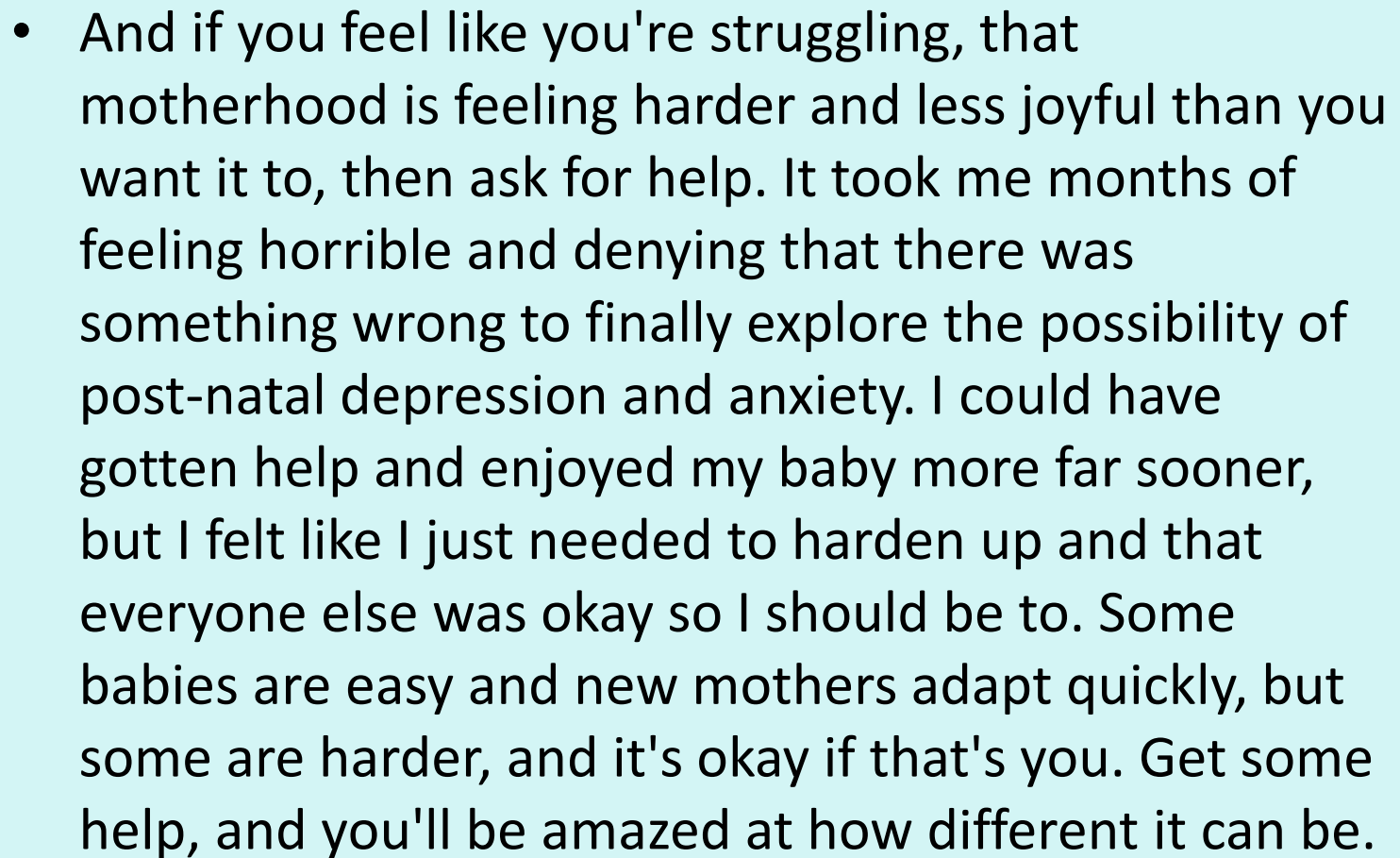


Sharing mental health concerns

As someone who experienced fairly significant maternal anxiety, I urge you to talk to people ... If the people you were hoping would listen, don't quite understand, please seek help from a kind, understanding professional ... they are out there and they are magnificent.



Mumming can be hard. But it shouldn't always feel hard, and if it does, or you feel really sad, or often worried, or that voice in your head is telling you that you're not ok, please tell someone who you trust to listen to you. Between hormones changing, and adjusting to the new normal, things can get on top of us and it is ok to speak up if you're not ok.

- 
- And if you feel like you're struggling, that motherhood is feeling harder and less joyful than you want it to, then ask for help. It took me months of feeling horrible and denying that there was something wrong to finally explore the possibility of post-natal depression and anxiety. I could have gotten help and enjoyed my baby more far sooner, but I felt like I just needed to harden up and that everyone else was okay so I should be to. Some babies are easy and new mothers adapt quickly, but some are harder, and it's okay if that's you. Get some help, and you'll be amazed at how different it can be.

Trust yourself

Hey gorgeous Mama!

You did it! Your baby is here! You are amazing! My little tip for you as you embark on this glorious journey, **is to trust yourself**. You have been growing this beautiful baby in your womb for so many months, and although you couldn't see that cute face and those little toes, you were feeling your baby in a way no one else has been or ever will! So who knows your baby best Mama? You do. Trust what you know and what you feel. Don't let anyone plant any seeds of doubt in your heart or mind! You can do this. Yes, you need information and tips and ideas, and these will be shared with you in abundance I'm sure. Trust yourself to learn. Trust yourself during trial and error.

Trust yourself

So trust yourself.

Nobody is an expert at raising a child. Not your mum, your friends, your sisters, aunts, cousins, nor the woman offering advice from the next bed who is up to her 68th child. No medical professional is an expert. No baby guru. No author. No midwife. No nurse. Nobody.

So trust yourself....187

You are a new mum, yes, but your **instincts are on point**. So if the voice in your head is ever telling you to ask more, push more, that something isn't quite right, **trust it. 165**

“You know best”

- Don't allow the guilt to take over you. Think about what you want for you and your baby. Others can provide advice, but you know what is best. Don't let people make you feel bad if you don't want to or can't breastfeed. This is your choice. 14
- Be kind to yourself - you deserve it. Breastfeeding or Bottle feeding - it is YOUR DECISION. Simple as that. 55
- You will feel guilty about everything - formula feeding instead of breast; guilt. Letting your 2 year old watch 6 episodes of Pepper Pig back to back so you can have some peace and quiet; guilt. Try to let yourself off the hook.. 26

Find positive narratives and voices

My best suggestion is to look for the positive voices around you. The encouragers, the people who help you make a decision based on your individual needs and support you wherever you're at. Sometimes that's not a ready-made solution, it's not advice or a product, usually it's about listening and supporting you or helping you make your own educated decision.
(18)



Resilience – this too will pass

‘this too shall pass’ - this was my mantra. Don’t get me wrong I’ve had some priceless moments with my babies but every time someone went on about ‘cherishing every moment’ because it ‘goes so fast’ I wanted to scream. My mantra was to get through the tough times. Feeding problems; this too shall pass! Sleep regression; this too shall pass. Toddler tantrums; this too shall pass. So enjoy the good bits and don’t worry the crap bits will pass. (26)



Know you are not alone

Dear Mumma, Just know that you are not alone.

When your baby can't and won't sleep - there are others who are the same.

If you are having trouble breastfeeding your newborn - there are others who are the same.

When you don't know why your baby cries like they do, - there are others who are the same.

When your baby needs to be held day and night - there are others who are the same.

If you question your ability as a mother - there are others who are doing the same.

When you doubt yourself and the decisions you have to make - there are others who are also doing the same thing.

(91)

Tips, suggestions & a dose of prescription

Seek support – Find a village, Find your tribe

The thing that helped me most of all in my parenting ride so far was finding my community. I became a member of the Australian Breastfeeding Association and found a bunch of welcoming mums who gave me judgement free connection ...empowered me to learn to trust my instincts.
19

Find some mums that are further along in the journey than you. They often have great advice.(96)

There are people/services to help

Finding a supportive breastfeeding friendly GP and Child and Family (Health) Nurse.

I found my GP to be amazingly helpful, also the Australian Breastfeeding Association Helpline. The Raising Children Network website also gives helpful advice

Accept the help when offered

most importantly, accept the help when it's offered. Let a friend do the dishes for you or hang out the washing. It's ok to allow others to help you!! And this includes your partner.... (53)

Look after yourself

If Mum doesn't eat and drink her milk supply drops, if Mum is tired and stressed than baby tends to become unsettled. If Mum is isolated than she doesn't cope as well and baby doesn't get the best of her. If Mum becomes anxious or depressed she interacts less and her baby's development is hindered

- So don't cancel those dinner plans just because it's babies nap time, bring baby along, she can sleep in the pram.
- Its okay to put yourself first sometimes!
- Have long showers, monitor your bleeding, take care of your breasts and nipples (yes, very sore, I know), eat well, hydrate yourself with fluids and sleep – you cannot function without sleep! Letter 79
- Drink plenty of water and eat lots of fresh veg and fruit so you don't get constipated!

And finally...signing off

Mumma, you are doing an amazing job wherever you are. You are awesome and beautiful. All the best. Xxx
96

You are an awesome mamma and you are everything your baby needs. You have got this gig! 23

Most importantly know this, you are someone's mummy and they love you. Just Be The Best You Can Be...I wish you many blessings for the future 55



Motherhood breaks you and builds you. It breaks down those walls and softens us, it tears at us: when our babies cry, we want to make everything okay again for them, even as we're desperately trying to escape that piercing sound, so cleverly designed to cut us to the core. We become more vulnerable than we thought we ever could be, made so by these tiny humans who need so much, who need everything from us, who trust us to be everything they need. It builds us: we learn that we have more to give than we thought we could ever give. More love, more sleep, more smiles, more tears, more joy...more. We become more as we give more.

Top ten tips from mothers

Congratulations Mamma – You've got this!

1. Listen to people who give you advice but trust your instinct. You and your baby will figure it out together
2. Cherish the moments that give you joy and hang on tight when you feel out of your depth because the tough times do end and you do survive
3. Don't forget to ask for help and please don't say 'no' when help is offered.
4. Sleep is your greatest challenge so prioritise sleep for yourself over everything else you need to do.
5. Eat well, be kind to yourself and take time to breathe. Housework is not important
6. You are not alone and there is great advice and support out there
7. Feeding is a full time job and don't let people make you feel bad
8. Don't isolate yourself. Get out and go for a walk or a coffee and find your tribe
9. Nothing prepares you for the love you will experience so try to soak it all in. Inhale their smell, relish their soft warmth and remember the giggles.
10. You are an awesome mamma and you are everything your baby needs. You have got this gig!