

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



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Background



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Specialise in Perinatal Mental Health



Self-compassion based therapy with all clients

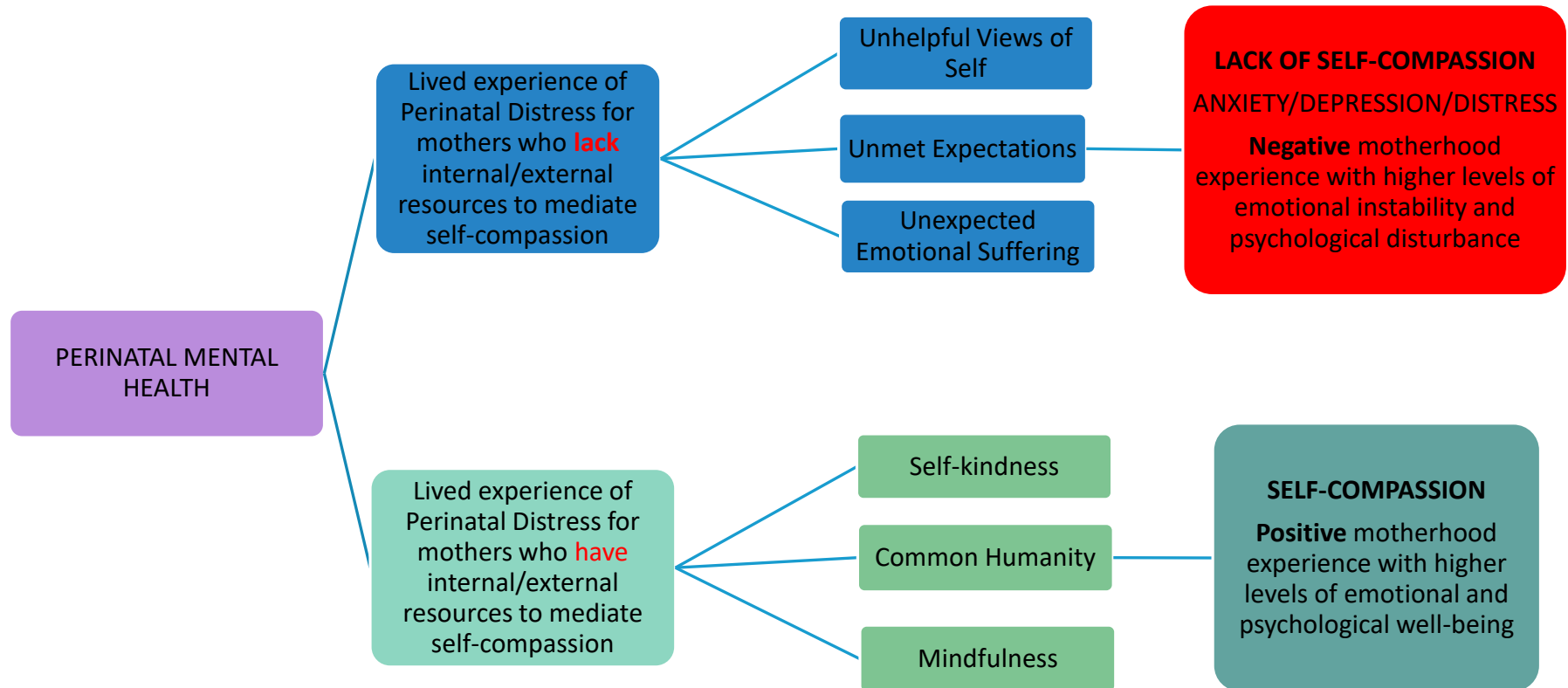


Research *“What meaning and role does Self-compassion play in the lives of women who experience anxiety and depression in the perinatal period?”* (2017)



Book *“Self-compassionate Motherhood”* (2018)

Conceptual model of : The role of self-compassion in the Perinatal period



Overview



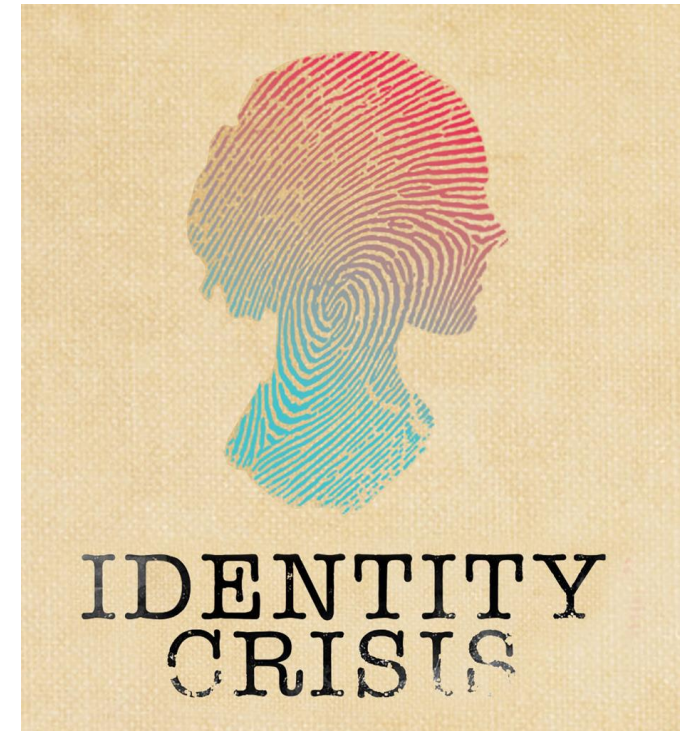
What is Identity?

The definition of identity is: who you are,
the way you think about yourself,
the way you are viewed by the world
and the characteristics that define you.

Identity Crisis

An identity crisis can be defined as:

A period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society.



What does it mean to become a mother?

- Becoming a mother requires a *recreation* of identity
- Reflection on personal understanding of being a mother
- Accompanied by intense love and intense fear
- Transition that can have a significant impact on well-being and mental health

“Giving birth to a new identity as a mother can be as challenging as giving birth to a baby”

What does it mean to become a mother?

- Anthropologists refer to the process of becoming a mother as “matrescence”

*“The term “**matrescence**,” coined by anthropologist Dana Raphael in the mid-'70s and brought into common use in psychology by clinical psychologist Aurelie Athan, head of the maternal psychology lab at Columbia University, describes a woman's transition into parenthood.”*

- A transition that has been overlooked and under explored
- Research has often been focused on the development/outcomes for the baby
- Limited research on the exploration of the mother’s lived experience

What does it mean to become a mother?

The meanings and definition of what a mother is are virtually endless

“A **mother** is a protector, disciplinarian and friend. A **mother** is a selfless, loving human who must sacrifice many of their wants and needs for the wants and needs of their children. A **mother** works hard to make sure their child is equipped with the knowledge, skills and abilities to make it as a competent human being.”

What does it mean to become a mother?

How do we help mothers find personal meaning in this transition?

- Explore personal experience of being mothered – does this create feelings of fear/love
- Explore where their constructs of motherhood have come from
- Question how this may influence their identity as mothers
- Question what kind of a mother they would like to be
- Help them create a unique identity as a mother that has meaning and purpose
- Not one that is modelled on past experiences or societal constructs

“There is no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one” – Jill Churchill



- One of the major causes of emotional and psychological suffering - *“loss of identity”*
- Mothers often say they “lost” their identity when they became a mother
- It is more likely that they faced an identity crisis and they forgot to recreate their identity.



Lost Identity

Some of the challenges faced in accepting this new identity as a mother have been identified as:

- Loss of Independence
- Loss of career and status
- Loss of relationships
- Loss of physical self
- Loss of social identity

Lost Identity

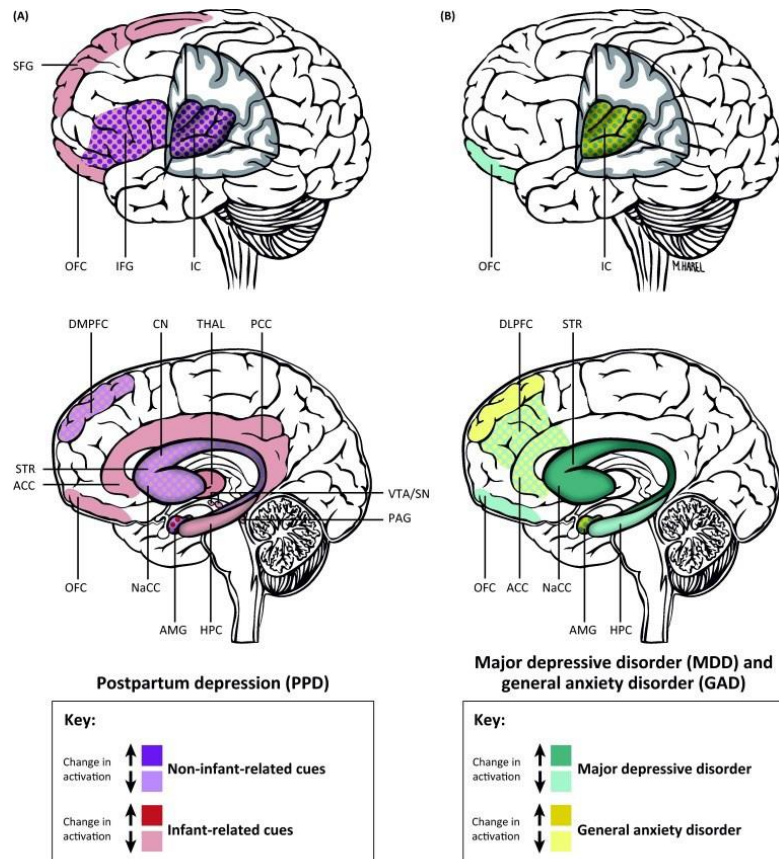
➤ This often results in:

- decreased self-esteem
- feelings of negative self-worth
- feelings of guilt, fear and shame
- increased levels of self-criticism and judgement.

- These negative views of self cause a high level of emotional distress
- This can lead to anxiety and depression in the perinatal period
- Impacts negatively on the motherhood experience.



Latest findings in neurobiology



Research has shown that the neural systems affected by anxiety and depression in the perinatal period overlap and interact with the systems involved in maternal caregiving behaviors.

“There are both similarities and differences in the neurobiology of postpartum anxiety and depression when compared with these disorders at other times in life, indicating different etiology and suggesting that different treatments should be considered.”

Various treatments for postpartum depression and anxiety are available; however, more research is needed to determine whether and how these treatments improve emotion and mood through their actions on the maternal brain.”

(Pawluski, Lonstein, Fleming; 2017)

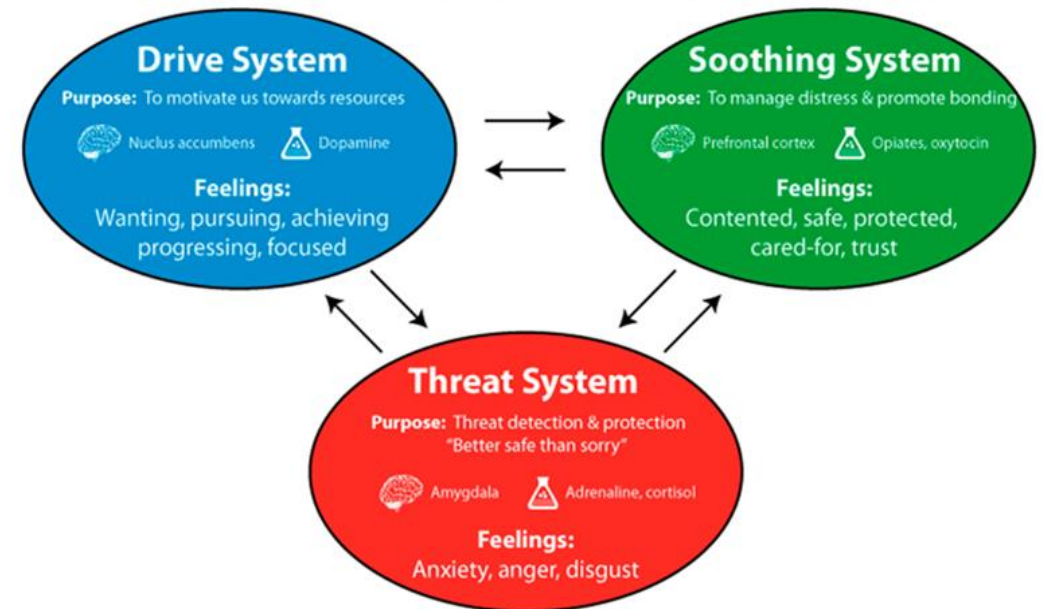
Compassion based Therapies

Psychological interventions to improve emotion and mood through their actions on the maternal brain.

- the threat and self-protection system,
- the drive and excitement system,
- the contentment and social safeness system

Emotional Regulation Systems

Paul Gilbert's evolutionary model proposes that human beings switch between three systems to manage their emotions. Each system is associated with different brain regions and different brain chemistry. Distress is caused by imbalance between the systems, often associated with under-development of the soothing system.



Adapted from: Gilbert, P. (ed) (2005). Compassion: Conceptualisations, Research and Use in Psychotherapy. Routledge.

Self-compassion

“Self-compassion is extending compassion to one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering”

Self-compassion as defined by Neff (2012)

**Dr. Kristen Neff:
3 Elements of Self-Compassion**



Overcome fear with self-kindness

SELF-KINDNESS AS A FOUNDATION TO CREATE A **UNIQUE** IDENTITY

Our maternal identity is often shaped by our own experience of being mothered or cared for

Creating a new identity depends on many factors, including;

- personality
- family of origin
- views on life and motherhood,
- support structure
- expectations
- strengths and weaknesses
- attitude

“Having a baby is an act of creation. It is not only about the creation of a new life it also requires the creation of a new identity for you as a mother” – Daniel Stern

Overcome fear with self-kindness

SELF-KINDNESS

- Ability to show kindness to oneself instead of criticism, self-doubt and judgement
- Encourage warmth, understanding and self-acceptance
- Same understanding and compassion that they extend to other new mothers towards themselves to address:
 - Fear of failure
 - “not good enough”
 - Inner Critic
 - Self-worth
 - Expectations
 - Social Comparisons



Loving Kindness Meditation for Mothers

May my baby be surrounded with love and kindness

May I respond to my baby with kindness

May my baby be safe and healthy

May my baby live with ease.

May we be surrounded with love and kindness

May we respond to each other with kindness

May we be safe and healthy

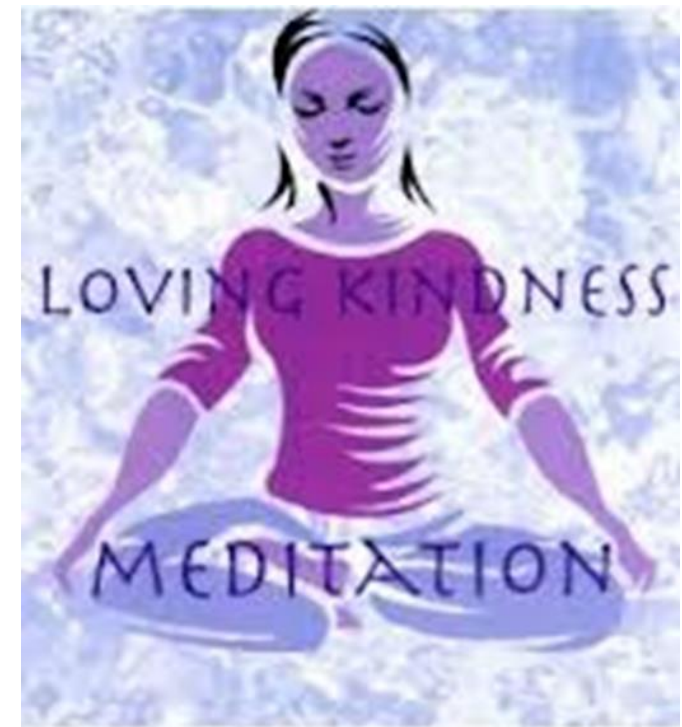
May we live with ease.

May I be filled with love and kindness

May I treat myself with kindness

May I be happy and healthy

May I live with ease.



Overcome fear with understanding

COMMON HUMMANITY TO ENCOURAGE ACCEPTANCE OF A NEW **UNIQUE** IDENTITY

- Recreating our identity can be a relatively easy task or incredibly challenging
- Ease of transition depends on a number of factors including;
 - our internal resources (emotional, psychological)
 - our external resources (support systems)
- Although pregnancies are often planned the transition into the new identity of a mother is not
- Partly due to the societal view that becoming a mother is a natural transition in life
 - “motherhood can be the most unnatural, unexpected experience”*
- Easier to accept change if you have prepared for change and committed to the change
- **Common Humanity** encourages the shared understanding of how challenging this transition can be

Overcome fear with understanding

COMMON HUMMANITY

- Recognising all mothers suffer - part of being human
- All humans are mortal, vulnerable and imperfect
- Personal thoughts, feelings and actions impacted by external factors
- Accept failings and difficulties with compassion and understanding
- Encourage connectedness rather than isolation and loneliness





Self-compassion break

“This is a moment of suffering

Suffering is part of life

May I be kind to myself

May I give myself the compassion I need”

Overcome fear with mindfulness



“Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them.”

Overcome fear with mindfulness

MINDFULNESS TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS IN MOTHERHOOD

- Whilst most mothers are prepared for the practical aspects of becoming a mother
- They are very unprepared for the emotional rollercoaster they are about to embark on
- Vast array of emotions from joy & happiness to sadness, resentment, anger & fear
- Combination of hormones, emotions and sleep deprivation increase levels of emotional distress
- There is very little psycho-education given to mothers
- Very few skills taught on how to deal with difficult emotions in motherhood

Having the skills to accept these difficult emotions as part of the experience is an essential element in making motherhood meaningful and enjoyable.



Overcome fear with mindfulness

Emotions and Mindfulness:

- Strategies to soothe and regulate emotions
- Validate difficult emotions
- Guided mindfulness practices
- Mindfulness Apps:
 - Insight Timer
 - Mind the Bump
 - Expectful
 - Headspace
 - Happifyer

6 STEPS TO MINDFULLY DEAL WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS



1

Turn toward your emotions with acceptance

Become aware of the emotion and identify where you sense it in your body.

Identify and label the emotion

To stay mindful, say to yourself, "This is anger" or "This is anxiety."

2



3

Accept your emotions

Don't deny the emotion. Acknowledge and accept that it is there.

Realize the impermanence of your emotions

Even if the emotion feels overwhelming, remember that it will pass.

4



5

Inquire and investigate

Ask yourself, "What triggered me? Why do I feel this way?"

Let go of the need to control your emotions

Be open to the outcome of your emotions and what unfolds.

6



The Gottman Institute

Overcome fear with mindfulness

Emotions and Mindfulness:

Mindful moments:

- Watching your baby sleep and breathe
- Mindfully breastfeeding
- Mindfully changing your baby
- Mindful cup of tea
- Mindful shower



Overcome fear with mindfulness

Emotions and Mindfulness:

Mindful connection:

- Notice how your baby smells, looks, feels, sounds
- Hold and hug your baby
- Use a caring tone of voice
- Make regular eye contact with your baby

“Attachment gaze – beam gleam”

(Diane Poole Heller, 2018)



The Yin and Yang of Self-compassion



Yin

- Comforting – providing support for our emotional needs
- Soothing – help ourselves feel physically calmer
- Validating – deeply understand our experience with kindness


Yang

- Protecting – feeling safe from harm and being able to say no
- Providing – giving ourselves what we genuinely need
- Motivating – encouragement, support, understanding

The Love and Fear of Motherhood

Self-compassion

Cultivates a healthy and caring relationship towards the self and others



Positive impact on the motherhood experience by enhancing psychological and emotional well-being



Is an essential pre-requisite for good parenting



Increases parental sensitivity and attunement



Creates a foundation for secure attachment

Challenge for Professionals.....

- Become more self-compassionate
- Live more compassionately
- Introduce self-compassion concepts to clients
- Provide a safe and secure environment to allow clients to address and overcome some of the fears surrounding being more self-compassionate.....

“For someone to develop genuine compassion towards others, first he or she must have a basis upon which to cultivate compassion, and that basis is the ability to connect to one’s own feelings and to care for one’s own welfare... Caring for others requires caring for oneself.”

- Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama -



"Becoming a mother is unknown, uncertain and unpredictable"

"Becoming a mother is the most unnatural joyous journey"

"I learnt it is important to become comfortable with uncertainty as nothing about motherhood is what you expect it to be"



"I thought I would know everything and being a good mother would just happen - the reality is no-one should have expectations but just embrace the experience and share the journey"



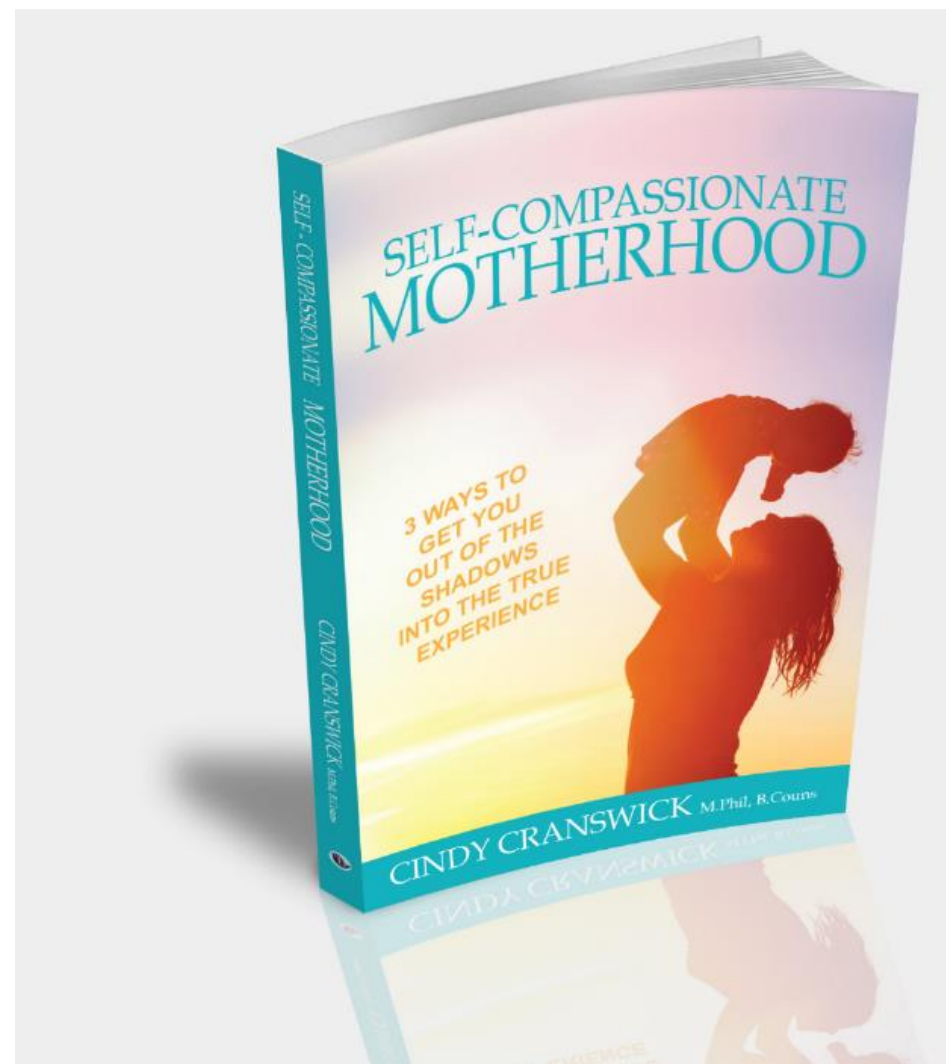
SELF-COMPASSIONATE MOTHERHOOD PROGRAM

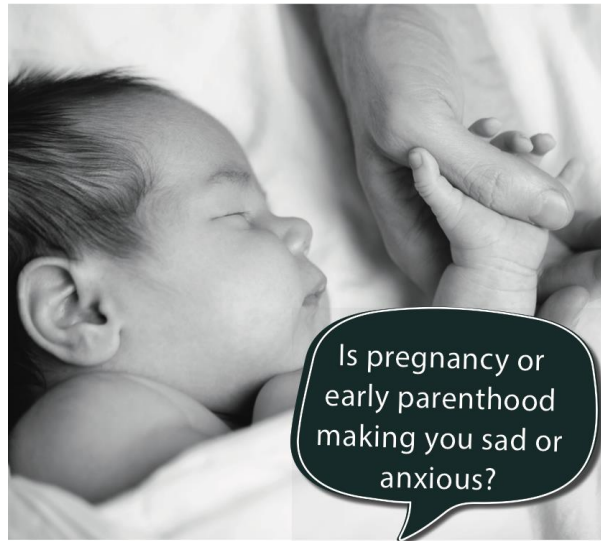
This program will take you on a journey of self-discovery and provide you with skills to bring the joy back into motherhood.

-  **Module 1** Recreating Your Identity as a Mother
-  **Module 2** Essential Ingredients for Motherhood
-  **Module 3** Self-Acceptance and Self-Kindness
-  **Module 4** Expectations and Being Human
-  **Module 5** Emotions and Mindfulness
-  **Module 6** Steps to Make Motherhood Meaningful

The program is based on the book "Self-compassionate Motherhood" and is designed for individuals or groups.

For more information please email info@changesforlife.com.au
www.changesforlife.com.au





Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia
National Helpline 1300 726 306

PANDA's National Helpline provides specialist perinatal emotional and mental health support to anyone during pregnancy and early parenthood, including partners and family members.

Helpline hours | Mon to Fri, 9am - 7.30pm AEST/AEDT
panda.org.au | howisdadgoing.org.au



"It happened to me."

Perinatal anxiety and depression is common, has many faces and does not discriminate.
And postnatal psychosis is less common but potentially even more serious.



Find out more at
www.panda.org.au



PERINATAL
DEPRESSION
& ANXIETY
AWARENESS WEEK
NOVEMBER 12-18



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