

MOTHERING THE MOTHER - IN THE ABSENCE OF A VILLAGE

Written by Rachel Bridge - Author, Perinatal Child & Family Psychologist

From me...

“AS A PROFESSIONAL WORKING IN THE FIELD OF PERINATAL AND PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH AND PARENTING, I IN NO WAY THOUGHT THAT I WAS ABOVE THE MAMA EXPERIENCES OF UNMET EXPECTATIONS OR THE ALL MIGHTY ‘MOTHER GUILT’...I JUST THOUGHT SINCE I KNEW THE RISK FACTORS OF PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTY, I KNOW THE APPROACHES THAT ARE HELPFUL, I TEACH THE SKILLS AND HAVE EXPERIENCED THE JOURNEY WITH SO MANY BEAUTIFUL AND INSPIRATIONAL MAMAS.... I THOUGHT, SURELY I WOULD HAVE THIS SORTED!!!!!! WOW!!!!!! WAS I IN FOR SURPRISE. THE INTENSITY OF THE FEELINGS BOUGHT ON BY THESE LITTLE BEINGS IS SOMETHING I COULD HAVE NEVER PREPARED MYSELF FOR. THE RAWNESS OF THE EMOTIONS FELT AS A MAMA CAUGHT ME OF GUARD LIKE A BLAST OF COLD WIND. THE ENDLESS UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, THE MAMA BEAR LIKE PROTECTIVENESS, THE SELF DOUBT, THE SLEEP DEPRIVATION, THE HORMONES, THE RELATIONSHIP ADJUSTMENTS AND THE SELF AND ROLE ADJUSTMENTS HAVE BEEN AND CONTINUE TO BE THE MOST CHALLENGING, REWARDING JOURNEY OF MY LIFE”.



THIS IS A SNIPPET TAKEN FROM MY VERY FIRST BLOG ENTRY, PUBLISHED IN 2014 BY WONDERFUL MAMA MAGAZINE. AN HONEST REFLECTION OF MY THEN, AND STILL NOW, EXPERIENCE OF THIS WONDERFULLY CHALLENGING JOURNEY OF PARENTHOOD.

REFLECTING BACK I CAN SEE, A MUM WHO WAS STRUGGLING. A MUM WHO KNEW THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT BUT WAS UNKNOWINGLY RESISTANT FROM REACHING OUT DURING THE HARD TIMES.

HELD BACK BY SOMETHING, A HEAVY WEIGHTED SOMETHING. I CAN NOW SEE, THAT THIS ‘SOMETHING’, IS FUELED BY EXPECTATIONS, MESSAGES AND BELIEFS. HELD BY SELF, HELD BY WELL MEANING OTHERS, AND HELD BY HISTORICAL, FAMILIAL AND SOCIETAL TRENDS.

MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A VILLAGE OF PEOPLE AROUND YOU THROUGH THE JOURNEY INTO MOTHERHOOD WAS ACKNOWLEDGED, AND APPRECIATED, BUT AT THE TIME, NOT TRULY FELT. I WAS FULLY AWARE, THAT NOT HAVING A SUPPORT SYSTEM AMPLIFIED THE VULNERABILITY OF EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES FOLLOWING BABIES ARRIVAL. BUT WHAT I DID NOT REALIZE WAS EVEN WHEN WONDERFULLY HELPFUL LOVING SUPPORT WAS READILY AVAILABLE, OUR OWN INTERNAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PARENTING AND THE EXPECTATIONS WE HOLD, CAN BE A GIGANTIC BARRIER TO REACHING OUT AND UTILIZING THE HELP THAT’S AVAILABLE.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, AS A NEW MUM, I FOUND MY SELF IN A PLACE OF HEIGHTENED UNCERTAINTY, AND ANXIETY AROUND ‘WHAT WAS BEST’. AND I CAN ABSOLUTELY SAY THAT BATTLING WITH EXPECTATIONS AROUND HOW I SHOULD OR SHOULDN’T BE PARENTING, AND HOW MY BABY SHOULD OR SHOULDN’T BE BEHAVING, STOPPED ME FROM REACHING OUT, SHARING MY EXPERIENCES AND ASKING FOR HELP.

THIS HERE, IS WHAT DRIVES MY PASSION FOR THE QUESTION... WHO MOTHERS THE MOTHER?

AND STEERS ME TOWARDS THE HOW OF, SHIFTING THE MINDSET TOWARDS ONE THAT ACKNOWLEDGES, VALUES AND ENSURES THAT PARENTS TOO ARE HELD AND THAT PRACTICES THAT OFFER SUPPORT, WHAT EVER THAT MAY BE, ARE A NORMAL PART OF WELCOMING A BABY INTO THE WORLD.

Mothing The Mother - In The Absence Of A Village

WRITTEN BY RACHEL BRIDGE - AUTHOR, PERINATAL, CHILD & FAMILY PSYCHOLOGIST

When we are preparing for babies arrival, there is a heavy focus on the physicality of pregnancy, health of the mother, and the growing baby. Towards the end of pregnancy, the focus shifts to working towards a healthy delivery of baby. When the baby arrives, the energy typically remains centered around the baby.

There may be a few token offers of advice like 'sleep when the baby sleeps', but the question remains...who actually mothers the mother. Who provides nurturance, care, and safety to the mother, who is journeying through the most significant and impactful stage of change she may ever experience.

'Matriscence - A process of change in self and change of relationships physically, emotionally, socially and mentally'.

The journey into and through parenthood comes with so many expectations, from so many directions, well meaning friends and family, health professionals, media, social media, as well as our own experiences and expectations of self.

In the western world we live in, we hold an individualised mind set, in which independence, autonomy and self sufficiency is celebrated, promoted and admired. Right from infancy, we are sent messages that foster this mind set.....

This mind set works against us. Feeling as though we aren't meeting the expectations of parenting can be one of the biggest barrier to seeking the support we so often need, as a normal part of the mothering journey.

Founder and executive director of COPE (Centre of Perinatal Excellence) has even given this experience a name, 'presentational parenting' a term now used to describe the experience of having unrealistic expectations about parenthood individually and socially.

And recognizes the pressure on parents to be meeting expectations from society and individually about what a good and competent mother is, has a significant impact on the mothers mental health, experiences of parenting and relationship with their new baby.

At times the phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child' can at times further isolate and confuse mothers during what is already a vulnerable time. And is contradictory to the commonly held beliefs and expectations that pair independence and 'good enough parenting' together.

The saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' comes from an era of parenting and a style of parenting (different to the western world) where communities were closer, generational family systems remained together...resulting in an actual village of support working together to take care of both mother and child.

My hope for you, is that this plants a seed for you to nurture and grow. And idea, a thought about how building or using your village may or may not look.

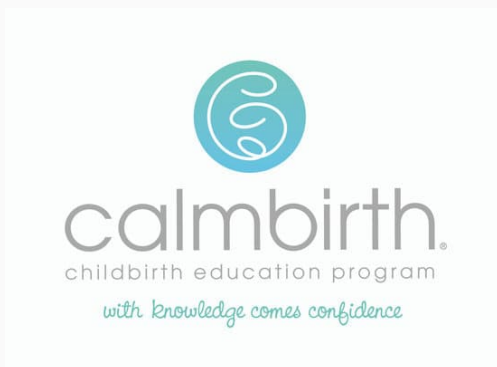
Because, I truly believe that if we can share the message around impactful parenting expectations, normalise experiences of uncertainty and self doubt, talk openly about the difficult emotional experiences that come along with this ever challenging journey of motherhood, and revisit what research states as developmentally normal infant behaviour, the barrier to share, to connect, to seek help and build a helpful village will begin to break away.

"

"My wish for women is for them too not feel the pressure to be perfect in their role as mother. And for them to feel free in expressing that being a mum is hard, and help is needed. And when women seek help, for this not to have the underlying message 'there is something wrong with you'".

Pinky Mckay

Interviewed by Rachel Bridge, 2016.



Helpful resources can be found at:

- Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Association (PANDA)
- COPE (cope.org.au)
- World Health Organisation (WHO)

If you are worried about your mental health, please seek help. PANDA has a growing list of Perinatal Services which will offer this form of support, available through phoning their helpline or accessing their website (<https://www.panda.org.au/>)

Rachel Bridge – Perinatal, Child & Family Psychologist and Author.
rachelbridge.mamabefrank@gmail.com
www.racheldbridge.com

Seeking help during a time where we are feeling so distant from our support system, may feel difficult, impossible even. Below are some helpful ways to build your village, during a time of social distancing.

- I feel, I need. Thinking about how your family and friends may be able to support you during your postnatal journey is really important. Being able to ask for what you need, is even more so. "I'm feeling overwhelmed by the thought of being alone when our baby arrives, it would be helpful if you could support us by.....
 - meal delivery
 - helping with washing
 - checking in on me with a phone call or text
- Open and honest communication with your partner is crucial, now more than ever. Working towards a space where you and your partner are both able to openly express one another's feelings and needs can really nurture the experiences of the postnatal period and beyond.
- Utilizing the benefits that the online world can offer. Linking in with supportive and helpful online groups during the early stages of motherhood and parenting can be helpful. It is important, that you find a group that leaves you feeling supported, and this may differ depending on each mothers personal journey.
- Setting up an agreement with a trusted and supportive loved one, separate from your partner, to talk/debrief/express your experiences of the changes that are upon you, either by phone, or face time is also important. Think 'women's circle', there is so much value in connecting with other like minded mamas about your experiences.
- Explore postnatal care options available to you, that sit within the 'essential services' category. For example, Doulas can offer wonderfully holistic and supportive care during the postnatal period.
- If finances allow, organizing services such as meal delivery, can ease some stress and offer you more time to take care of you and your baby.
- Utilizing the governments Medicare allowance for telehealth should also be encouraged. There are perinatal psychologists, like myself, nationally, who are able to provide support to you as you move through the most significant time of change