


MUMS  
AT THE

*Table*

An illustration of a woman with long black hair, wearing a green textured sweater and blue earrings. On top of her head is a brown bowl containing several books of different colors (blue, red, yellow, white) and symbols including a red heart, a green awareness ribbon, and a white daisy. Above the bowl is a large, tangled pink scribble. The background is light pink with scattered white daisies, blue clouds, and white plus signs. The woman's hands are clasped in front of her.

**YOUR  
MENTAL  
WELLNESS  
GUIDE**

Mums At The Table Presents

# LIFE IN THE *grey*

A micro podcast where we try to understand what makes us tick and how it impacts our lives and relationships.



lifeinthegrey.transistor.fm



from the editor *Melody Tan*

**Y**ou've probably heard it before: "Put your own oxygen mask on first." It's a common instruction given during any pre-flight briefing and often used as an analogy to remind mums to look after themselves; that mums first need to care for themselves so they have the capacity and energy to support their family.

For many of us however, taking the time to do anything for ourselves can bring with it a niggling sense of guilt, the feeling we really should be doing something more "productive" or "better" with our time.

Mums are often the poster children of "soldier on". Being sick doesn't stop us functioning, it simply slows us down—sometimes. Laundry still needs washing, dinner still needs cooking and the kids still need driving around. Ain't no virus gonna keep us down.

If we fail to look after ourselves when the physical symptoms are screaming for us to stop, how are we to recognise the more subtle cries for help that come from our emotional and mental health?

Let me be clear: I'm not talking about bubble baths and spa treatments, although those certainly can help. Caring for our mental health—that of our own and of our children—isn't something soap suds and massage oils alone can fix. It's about building our resilience and giving ourselves the best chance to manage the stresses that come our way (and there's more than just a few) so we don't lose it, either by having a breakdown or by yelling. Sometimes, this means learning relaxation techniques. For others, it may be doing the things we used to enjoy before we had children; things that make our heart sing and make us ourselves again.

As a society, we're only starting to grasp the importance of mental wellness. It's wonderful there is a growing understanding and awareness of mental wellbeing, but we're not so far removed from previous generations who viewed mental health struggles as taboo, which can cause us to struggle to help ourselves and our children.

As the village it takes to raise a mum, we're here with you. It's why this booklet exists. It's here to give us mums permission to look after ourselves and it's also here to give us a toolkit to help our children. And perhaps, the best mental health tool our children can have is to see us model looking after ourselves in a way that enables us to look after others better.



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# Quick Facts



There are four pillars of good health:

1. Sleep
2. Purpose
3. Activity
4. Nutrition



## Baby brain is real

Our brain structure becomes permanently altered with each pregnancy. The physical toll of pregnancy and birth, as well as the sleep deprivation and psychological changes of becoming a mum, can lead women to be depleted mentally and physically.

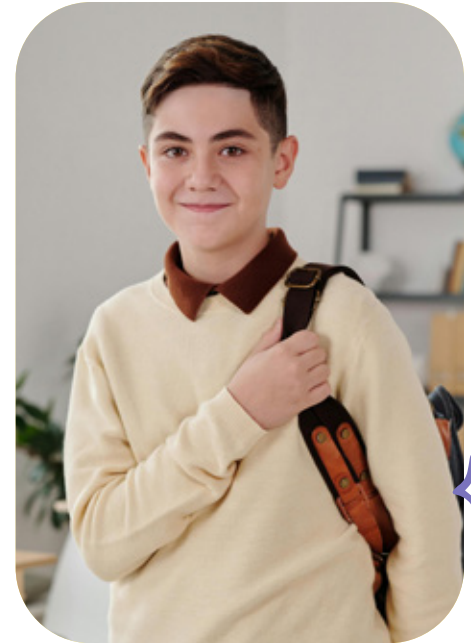


## This too shall pass

Some days will feel like treading water. That's okay. Staying afloat is also progress. Give yourself grace—and cereal for dinner sometimes is fine.

## A reminder to the single mums:

You are enough for your children. You might feel alone, but you're not invisible.



## It's okay to be imperfect

Our worth isn't measured by our productivity or how tidy our house is. Don't be afraid to show a less than perfect front. Real friends should make your life easier, not judge it. That's what a real village should be like.



# Seven ways to look after yourself

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by Dr Charise Deveney

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**P**regnancy, the postpartum period and motherhood ask a lot from your body and we often see mothers in a completely depleted state.

This has wide-reaching consequences not only for the woman but also her children, intimate relationships and broader family units. That's because unfortunately, when we are depleted, our vulnerability for depression and/or anxiety increases.

It's important to discover the ways we can nurture and nourish ourselves amongst the daily management of kids, work and changing schedules. Don't worry, I'm not about to preach unrealistic expectations about sleep and other lifestyle factors. I understand all-too-intimately the chaos that is motherhood, with all its competing demands and challenges. I want to arm you with the knowledge that you can use, in whichever way fits with your circumstances, so that you can develop your own framework to support your psychological and overall wellbeing.



## 1. Sleep

You don't need me to tell you how important sleep is for health, vibrancy, energy, stress and overall wellbeing. To help increase your chances of getting rejuvenating sleep:

- Try to limit exposure to blue light from devices for at least an hour before you go to sleep.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Set up some sleep rituals that cue your body and mind to wind down.
- Reduce noise, avoid strenuous physical activity, limit exposure to emotionally stimulating activities such as TV, movies and social media.
- Nourish yourself by reading a good book, soaking in a warm bath with some essential oils (I like lavender, bergamot, rose geranium and sweet orange) or sip on a chamomile tea.
- Turn your bedroom into a lovely haven that has good airflow, is free from clutter and feels calming.

## 2. Rest

As mothers, we ask a lot from ourselves and our bodies. Just as we can't go without sleep for too long, the psyche can't push on for too long without getting some quality rest. Consider how you might be able to take steps to create periods of downtime, moments when you can be still:

- Those few mouthfuls of a warm drink in the morning.
- Pause and soak up the day when you look out the window for the first time in the morning.

- A few moments in the shower while you sink into the water running over your body releasing any tension from the day.

## 3. Food

The foods that we eat will either grow or slow us. Food fuels us for life and builds our bodies, but it also affects our moods, stress and energy levels, contributes to the balance or imbalance of our hormones, and shapes our gut and mental health. Given the significant reach of food on our wellbeing, pay good attention to the foods that you choose to eat and how they make you feel afterwards. Try to avoid processed foods high in chemicals, artificial colours, sweeteners, flavour enhancers and additives. They affect our minds and bodies in profound and unwanted ways. Instead, try eating natural whole foods brimming with life and energy. By choosing foods that are colourful (ie. eat the rainbow) we provide our bodies with a variety of vitamins and minerals and enhance mood and wellbeing.

## 4. Physical activity and movement

I'm not talking boot camp here, but by all means do that if that serves you well. What I'm talking about is gentle, low-impact, moderate physical activity such as brisk walking (with pram or kids in tow), swimming, cycling, stretching, core training such as Pilates and free weights. Find a gym that has a creche. Join a mothers' walking group.

## 5. Adjust your focus

Motherhood reshapes our self-identity and role-identity. It can take some time to adjust and this is perfectly normal.



What's important here is that you allow yourself the time and space to settle into your role as a mum. I like to think that we are the sum of many different parts: A woman, a worker, daughter, sister, friend and now mother. Different parts shine brighter than others at different stages of life. However, those other parts don't cease to exist—our relationship with them might have just shifted. Motherhood involves a process of self and identity reorganisation. Observe and notice which parts are currently shining brighter and which parts could use a bit of brightening!

## 6. Community

Connectedness and belonging are two important cornerstones of wellbeing. This refers to our felt sense of knowing that there are others around us for lighthearted banter and deeper levels

of support. Why not join a playgroup or a mums and bubs Pilates group? Surrounding yourself with professional support is also important if you are concerned about your mood or overall wellbeing. Ask for help and remember that you are never alone in your motherhood journey.

## 7. Remember pampering

I'm talking about things that we do for ourselves that feel totally luxurious and indulgent. A pampering session will give you the extended time-out that all mothers need to truly fill their cup back up.

Dr Charise Deveney is the founder and principal clinical psychologist of Let's Talk Psychology Practice and the Perinatal Village. She specialises in the treatment of perinatal and infant mental health.

# A daily check-in practice



- ❑ Close your eyes, inhale deeply and pause. Then exhale deeply and pause. Be mindful of being in the moment with your breath. Do this for a few breaths.
- ❑ Now, during each breath in, scan over your body. Do you notice any tension? Breathe into any tension and release on the out breath with a long, slow, deep sigh.
- ❑ Check-in: Where is my mind? Is it busy or settled? What thoughts are demanding my attention? Where is my energy level sitting? How am I feeling? Tired (likely!) or energised? Just notice.
- ❑ Reflect: What do I need in this moment? Stretch and relax? Drink a cup of warm herbal tea? Move? Eat a nourishing meal or snack? Be with my baby and connect? Call a friend for a chat? Attend to a housework task for a sense of mastery? Run a warm shower? Notice the outside world?

We're the village it takes  
to raise a ~~child~~ mum



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# Anxiety in children



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by Claire Marsh

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It is normal to experience some common fears at various ages and in certain social situations. However, anxiety in children is a more serious condition that can impact on their mental health and quality of life.

Anxiety disorders are caused by different factors, including:

- family history (a genetic predisposition)
- environmental factors such as ongoing stressful situations or traumatic life events
- brain chemistry
- personality factors
- medical problems (for example, anaphylaxis creating fear around certain triggers)
- or a combination of these

#### What are the signs of anxiety in a child?

Anxiety symptoms will vary depending on the child's personality and what's going on in the child's life. However, there are some typical signs to watch out for:

#### Physical symptoms

- Stomachaches
- Changes in toileting habits
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Appearing restless and sweaty

Note that while older children can tell you exactly what's wrong, younger kids may just tell you they're not feeling well.

#### Behavioural signs

- Displaying avoidance of certain situations (such as school-age children refusing to go to school)
- Refusing to do things or being irritable when asked, as a way of avoidance
- Getting easily upset over seemingly small matters or things they should be able to do or have done before
- Not wanting to try new things; trying to get a parent to do something for them
- Seeking reassurance from a parent frequently

#### Mistakes parents make when dealing with a child's anxiety

There are two typical reactions parents have when faced with an anxious child:

1. Interpret anxious behaviour as being naughty or defiant and respond with discipline. Unfortunately, this will not alleviate a child's anxiety.
2. Step in to make the situation easier for the child by doing the task or solving the problem for them. They may also enable the child in their avoidance by not requiring them to go to certain places or do certain tasks because it's distressing for them, and for the parent to see their child in a fearful state. However, constantly shielding and removing obstacles for a child means they don't get the chance to learn they are capable of coping in that situation, that perhaps the danger isn't real but perceived or have positive experiences in that situation that will help them to feel less fearful about it in the future.

#### 7 ways to help your child with anxiety

Anxiety is not something a child will necessarily just "grow out of". Early intervention is the key and there are some practical ways parents can respond to their child's anxiety.

##### 1. Help them calm down

If you believe their reaction is indeed anxiety, some simple relaxed breathing can help them to calm down. Guide your child to breathe in slowly and deeply for three seconds, hold for three seconds, then exhale for three seconds. Repeat as necessary. Talking with them will have a greater impact when they are calmer because they are able to think and reason. While they are anxious, they are not likely to process your words, but your calm tone of voice could be soothing for them.

##### 2. Clear limit-setting

Anxious children respond very well to this as without it, their worry



Create a space and time for your child to let their worries out.

can be consuming their thoughts throughout the day. Create a space and time for your child to let their worries out, for example a “worry box” where they spend 10–15 minutes per day during their “worry time” writing or drawing what worries their mind got stuck on during the day. When the time is up, the box gets closed and put away. This gives a child reassurance and validation that their thoughts matter, but that they don’t have to listen to what their fearful mind is telling them all the time.

### 3. Build their confidence gradually

Expose them to their fear triggers or specific phobias in little steps. For example, if your child is afraid of the water or swimming, don’t avoid taking them to the pool, but maybe start out by having them sit and watch other children swimming, slowly building up to putting their feet in the shallow end and eventually more of their body in the water (with your support) until they can be in there on their own. This might happen over a number of weeks or even longer, so be patient.

### 4. Make plans for the future

What could they do if things don’t go according to plan? Create time and space to talk about their fears. Children may have very real intense fears about what’s happening in their lives and the world, for example, the death of a pet or loved one, natural disasters or car crashes. It’s important we don’t sugar-coat our explanations to minimise these fears but

to validate them and explain them in a very realistic and factual way. This will help children to understand and cope better.

### 5. Challenge the “what if” thoughts

Help them counter a negative and unhelpful thought that will trigger anxiety with a thought that is equally as likely and more helpful in building courage. For example, “What if I go to school and no-one talks to me?” could become “What if I go to school today and have fun with my friends?”. The reality is we don’t know and can’t predict what will really happen.

### 6. Model

Voice your own fears and anxiety. For example, “I’m doing a presentation at work today and I’m feeling kind of scared. I’m worried I might mess it up, but I know I have prepared for it and I will give it my best shot.”

### 7. Get professional help

Start with your GP who can refer you to psychology services such as counselling. Having individual attention from a trained professional with experience in evidence-based strategies can be hugely beneficial and can fast-track your child’s progress.

Claire Marsh is a registered psychologist and a trained facilitator of the Cool Kids anxiety program designed to help young people between the ages of seven and 17.

# SUPPORTING YOUR ANXIOUS CHILD

by Michael Grose & Dr Jodi Richardson

Remembering what's important in the moment is so much harder when your own anxiety shows up because it interferes with decision-making. That's why we're so fond of the easy-to-remember acronym SOBER.

**S**top

**O**bserve

**B**reathe

**E**xpand

**R**espond

## Stop

When it comes to parenting an anxious child, they need your full attention during anxious times. By providing them with your undivided attention, you're in a much better position to respond helpfully. You don't necessarily need to drop everything the instant your child needs you; it's okay to say that you're in the middle of doing something but that you'll be with them in a moment. That way, when you are with them, it's easier to be present and really listen. Multi-tasking also increases stress, and you probably already have enough of that too.

## Observe

This is your opportunity to take in

what's actually happening. To be the observer. Observing the situation for what it is. It's a simple idea, but not always easy. What's your child doing at the moment? What is their behaviour telling you? What are you thinking about as this scene unfolds before you? Are you annoyed that this is happening again? Are you feeling impatient, wanting to step in and fix it so that it's over with? Or are you feeling a sense of sadness that your child is suffering in this moment? Being able to take a mental step back and observe what's going on under these circumstances is something that will take time. Please be compassionate and patient with yourself.

## Breathe

Breathing deeply and slowly is the one way the relaxation response can be initiated and the fight-or-flight response can be dialled down. Taking a moment for a few breaths here is your way to settle any of your own stress and anxiety so that you're in a good frame of mind to thoughtfully respond to what's happening.

## Expand

This refers to expanding your awareness to the possibilities in the moment. Where are you? What's happening next? Are you in the best position to respond in the way you would like? If you're already running late for an appointment and anxiety shows up, how can you respond in a way that keeps everyone moving forward without revisiting past habits of avoidance and reassurance? What are your options?

## Respond

The very first sentence to pass your lips as a parent responding to an anxious child needs to be one of validation. This is your chance to say, "I get it."

They could be frustrated, angry, teary, keen to share their worries or wanting to avoid an anxiety-provoking situation. All of these are signs that they're anxious, and what they need first and foremost is for you to recognise they're in need and then communicate to them that

their message is received. Here are some things you could say:

- "I can see you're feeling worried about going to the party."
- "Thanks for telling me you're feeling so nervous about the test. I get it."
- "Oh I get it, you're having the thought that no reply to your text means you must have done something wrong."

All of these responses are examples of responding with empathy.

And if you're not sure what to say in the moment, you can simply start by saying, "I'm so glad you told me."

It may take you a little practice to remember to put these thinking skills into play when you're responding to your child's anxiety. That's perfectly fine. You're human, and these situations can be upsetting and stressful. Eventually, though, it will become more automatic. Each time you practise using SOBER, you're retraining your brain to respond in this helpful way.

This is an edited extract from *Anxious Kids* by Michael Grose & Dr Jodi Richardson. Michael Grose is one of Australia's leading parenting and educational writers and speakers. Dr Jodi Richardson is an expert on anxiety, having lived it and studied it. She is the co-creator of the Parenting Anxious Kids online course.





# How to let go of *stay-at-home* mum resentment

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by Kymberley McMurray

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**D**eciding to be the stay-at-home parent may have been “the best thing” when you started a family—taking a step back from your career, asking for flexible hours, working from home or even quitting your job entirely to be with your children.

What begins as a dream for some however, can turn into a nightmare for many, leading to stay-at-home mum resentment. Of course, as it comes with the territory, such resentment is also paired with a huge amount of mum guilt. Which mum, after all, resents being able to stay at home and spend time with their children?

Before your life as a full-time parent, you may have been excelling in your career and were recognised for your accomplishments outside of the home. From the moment you began maternity leave, then transitioned into staying at home full-time with your new baby, your identity shifted from career woman, wife and friend

to just “mum” in a short period of time.

This sudden shift in identity can cause depression, anxiety, isolation and stress. Alongside the responsibility of running a household, there is the added task of raising your kids and all that comes with looking after young children.

While you’re struggling with your mental health and new parenthood—and questioning your decision to stay home—hearing comments about how nice it must be not to go to work doesn’t help.

## **Unmet needs cause resentment**

Staying at home and putting the needs of your kids before your own is a sacrifice. Sadly, these are accomplishments that can be difficult to measure. Picking up after the children, nap times and challenging tantrums are just some of the battles you have to fight every single day. The problem is that even the small wins of home life don’t get recognised.



## Don't feel guilty about leaving your partner alone with the kids.

Society has conditioned us to believe that a “good mother” is selfless. She prioritises the needs of others over her own.

This idea, alongside a lack of support and perceived value, means mothers can enter into a cycle where they give so much with little return or appreciation. “Motherhood is a breeding ground

for insidiously self-destructive behaviour,” Beth Berry writes in her book, *Motherwhelmed*. “While our nurturing, self-sacrificial instincts are beautiful and life-preserving, they’re also a fast track to burnout, resentment, exhaustion and destruction, if we’re not careful. It’s natural to minimise our needs in the interest of those we love, but it’s not natural that we’re raising our children in isolation and that the bulk of their needs are falling on one person instead of a tribe of extended family members and friends.

“This, and other profoundly affecting gaps within our culture, makes self-awareness and self-nurturing that much more essential.”

### How to overcome resentment

Maybe you’re stuck in a cycle of giving so much that you’ve lost your self-worth and your identity. Maybe you’ve fallen into the habit of resenting your partner for the littlest things and it’s driving a wedge in your relationship.

Here are five steps you can take to stop feeling resentful—and guilty for feeling that way.

#### 1. Acknowledge it

The first step to overcoming stay-at-home mum resentment is to acknowledge it.

Sit with that feeling that you get when your husband tells you he’s going on a fishing trip with the boys this weekend and you get another day with the kids by yourself. Or the thought that he has a full-time career while your work life involves changing nappies and vacuuming floors.

It’s not pretty and it can be uncomfortable, but acknowledging you feel a certain way instead of dismissing it goes a long way in communicating how you really feel to your partner.

#### 2. Be compassionate

Be compassionate towards yourself and your partner. They may not be enjoying the long hours they have to spend in the office. They may be facing their own difficulties and challenges. They may truly want to help you but don’t actually know where to start.

It’s important to take some time for yourself too. Don’t feel guilty about leaving your partner alone with the kids. It’s only when you find ways to fit in some downtime to recharge and reset that you can return and be a better mum.

#### 3. Identify the unmet need

Identify the need that you feel is being unmet. Is it a lack of support? Encouragement? Self-care? Identifying these needs are essential in finding a solution. Involve your partner.

#### 4. Take action

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Let your partner know how you feel; discuss ways in which both of you can work together to better handle the responsibility of raising children. Whether that’s making a schedule or asking your wider family members to get involved, make a plan so that you can take some time off.

#### 5. Let go of the past

Take a deep breath and let go of all the times when you’ve felt anger and resentment towards your partner for failing to meet your needs and expectations. We’re all human after all. Forgiving your partner and letting go of the past is the only way that you can move forward.

### Moving beyond resentment

If you don’t find ways to meet your needs, you will always feel trapped in the cycle of resentment. You don’t have to forget about the needs of others, but we encourage you to start meeting your own needs first.

KyMBERLEY McMURRAY works in marketing and is a freelance writer from Sydney.



# Postnatal depression symptoms and where to get help

It's entirely normal to experience sadness, anxiety and challenging moments during the period of adjustment after your baby is born. You may become moody—even teary.

However, if these feelings continue or worsen after more than a week, it may be indicative of postnatal depression.

While there are symptoms that could indicate you have postnatal depression, it's important to remember that everybody's experience is different.

This means the type and severity of symptoms can differ from person to person.

However, most tellingly of whether you have postnatal depression or not is your inability to enjoy your baby—or your new situation. Other symptoms may include:

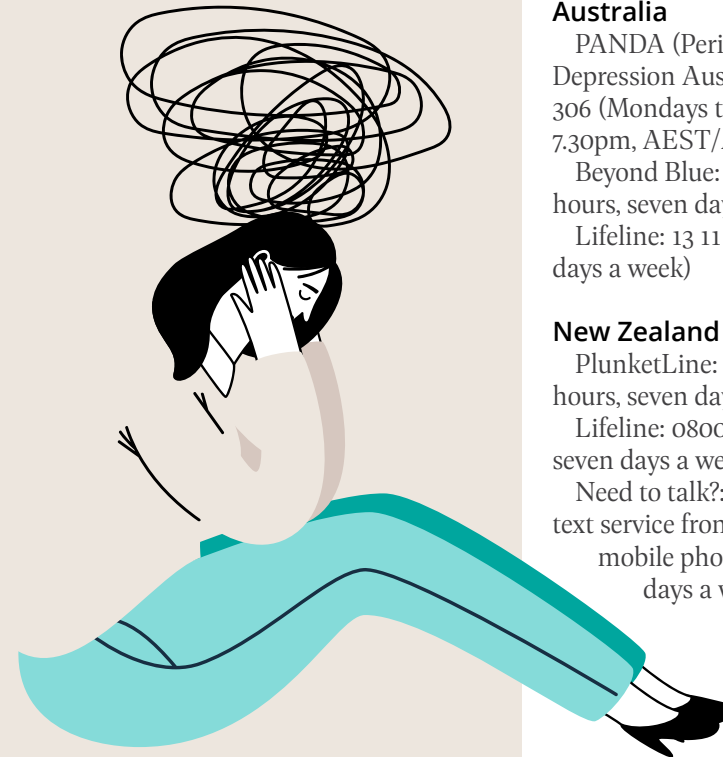
- Experiencing panic attacks
- Feeling numb
- Constantly nervous and often worrying about the health, well-being or safety of your baby
- Feeling exhausted, lethargic or lacking in energy

- Can't sleep or sleeping too much
- Highly sensitive, often on the verge of tears
- Easily annoyed or irritated
- Lacking interest in most things, even yourself and/or your baby
- Unable to concentrate, focus, remember, make decisions or think clearly
- Have thoughts of self-harm or of harming your baby (or others)
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Increasing sense of worthlessness, helplessness and hopelessness
- Feeling inadequate or a failure as a mother
- Developing obsessive or compulsive thoughts and/or behaviours
- Abrupt mood swings
- Feeling isolated, but scared of being alone or going out

Postnatal depression affects one in seven women. If you think you're suffering from postnatal depression, you should seek professional help right away.

## Postnatal psychosis

While less common than postnatal depression, postnatal psychosis is a very serious medical emergency. It can develop between one and 12 weeks after childbirth. Symptoms include having difficulties thinking clearly and experiencing extreme mood swings or hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there). If you think you or someone you know may be suffering from postnatal psychosis, seek professional help immediately.



## WHERE TO FIND HELP

It's important to talk to a psychologist, but the first one you see may not be the one you feel the most comfortable with or who can help you. Remember that you can change psychologists until you find one who suits you.

It can be difficult for you to verbalise the type of help you need but lean on the support you have available to you. This could be your husband, in-laws or friends. It's fine to leave your baby with someone you trust for a few hours while you get some rest.

### Australia

PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia): 1300 726 306 (Mondays to Fridays, 9am–7.30pm, AEST/AEDT)

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636 (24 hours, seven days a week)

Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24 hours, seven days a week)

### New Zealand

PlunketLine: 0800 933 922 (24 hours, seven days a week)

Lifeline: 0800 543 354 (24 hours, seven days a week)

Need to talk?: 1737 (free call or text service from any landline or mobile phone, 24 hours, seven days a week)



# Building resilience in children

by Melody Tan

**F**irst, the bad news. More young people than ever before are experiencing mental health issues, part of the epidemic spreading across the developed world.

According to [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au), 14 per cent of Australian children and adolescents aged four to 17 have mental health or behavioural problems, and the trend is increasing.

“A child’s resilience level appears to drop dramatically between the ages of 10 and 15,” says psychologist Collett Smart.

The rise in anxiety in children, their lack of self-esteem and even how easily they give up, all have an impact on how resilient they are.

Susie Mogg is the founder of Resilience In . . . , an organisation focused on building resilience in children, parents and workplaces.

She believes there are three main reasons why young children’s mental health is getting worse today.

## 1. Bad parenting style

There are two styles of parenting in particular that prevent us from raising resilient children: helicopter and lawn-mower.

Both parenting styles come from a place of good intent: Wanting to keep our children safe and to help them be the best they can be. “But unfortunately, the methods used to achieve this are often counter-productive and add to the problems kids face today,” says Susie.

“Helicopter parents can prevent kids from taking their own risks and working out for themselves what is safe and

what they are capable of. They can also prevent children from learning problem solving skills, how to make decisions, and experience the sense of mastery and self-worth that comes from being given greater levels of independence and responsibility. Lawnmower parents can prevent their kids from experiencing and learning from failure and from learning that they can get better at things through hard work and effort.”

Susie also points out that the emotional and social skills kids need to draw upon to help them become less fragile are not consistently taught in all schools and preschools. Many parents are also not well-versed in what these skills are and how to teach them, nor do they necessarily have the capacity to add this to their own busy schedules. Children are also wired differently, with some being more inherently able to deal with tough times than others.

## 2. Lack of free play

“Children learn best by play,” says Dr Sarah McKay, neuroscientist and the founder of the Neuroscience Academy. “They’re driven by a natural urge to play, do, taste, explore, feel, smell, experiment and interact—with people and animals, pots and pans in the bottom drawer, and puddles of rain. It’s by interacting so intensely with the world that their brains develop.”

But kids today are busier in a more structured way than they have been in the past. Many

participate in multiple extra-curricular activities and are pushed to achieve more than their parents ever did.

“Because of all of this, kids have much less unstructured free play than in the past,” Susie adds. “This can prevent them from learning how to be creative, problem solve, make decisions, build relationships and negotiate, leading to what appears to be their overall fragility and inability to function independently.”

## 3. Toxic stress

Growing up in a family that is socio-economically deprived, exposure to maltreatment, low IQ and poor self-control are all risk factors for poor adult health and social outcomes, including criminal convictions, prescription fills, welfare claims and hospital visits.

That’s because they’re often the cause of toxic stress: Stress that is extreme or long lasting or occurs outside supportive relationships. According to Dr Sarah, toxic stress derails brain development, with damaging effects on learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health.

The Christchurch earthquakes, which started in September 2010 and continued to the early part of 2011, have provided additional insights into how extreme stress in infancy impacts a child’s resilience level in childhood.

“There are significantly more behavioural problems and post-traumatic stress symptoms





in the children who started school after experiencing the earthquakes,” says Dr Sarah. “One of the strongest predictors of whether children would experience difficulties was the age the child was when the earthquakes began.

“Surprisingly, children younger than two when the sequence began were more vulnerable than older children . . . this is because the older children experienced a buffer period of normal stress-free brain development. These children have grown up in an unpredictable world, many in highly stressed families. During a period of incredible neural plasticity, the children’s stress response systems were activated thousands of times. Exposure to extreme stress before the age of two activates the immature stress response system, with enduring consequences for children’s behaviour.”

### 5 tools for building resilience in children

It’s time for some good news. There are actually some very simple things we can do as parents to build up our children’s resilience.

#### 1. Play an active role in your child’s life

At around 10 years of age, many children still feel like they have at least one significant adult in their lives who is

there listening and encouraging. But as Collett observes, by the time they reach their teens, they begin to feel their parents pulling away, resulting in a subsequent drop in their resilience levels.

“Even in those teen years, we need to find ways to creative lean in so they know we’re still there, we still care and we’re still around to listen,” says Collett.

Being engaged also includes simply being around for everyday life—simple things such as exercising, cooking and reading stories.

#### 2. Help them identify their emotions

Psychological researcher Dr John Gottman’s model of emotion coaching involves helping children recognise, understand and express their emotions with five steps:

- Be aware of your child’s emotions
- Recognise your child’s expression of emotion as a perfect moment for intimacy and teaching
- Listen with empathy and validate your child’s feelings
- Help your child learn to label their emotions with words
- Set limits when you are helping your child to solve problems or deal with upsetting situations appropriately

“Next time your child expresses their

emotions, extend their vocabulary by helping them to label these feelings,” says Susie. “Then validate their emotions by playing back what you have heard—this doesn’t mean you are agreeing with them!”

#### 3. Let them realise they have something to offer

Give them life skills, encourage them to do chores and have (healthy) expectations of them. This also gives them a sense of independence.

“Giving children independence enables them to gain knowledge of how to do something,” says Susie. “It teaches them self-discipline, allows them to achieve a sense of mastery and enhances their sense of self-worth. Independence leads to responsibility, which in turn is confidence building. Giving independence involves parents understanding kids’ developmental milestones, so they know when it is appropriate for them to take on new responsibilities.”

Susie recommends we challenge ourselves by thinking about how we are currently “rescuing” our children. Follow this by coming up with a list of things they can start to do by themselves and teach them how to do them.

#### 4. Give them the gift of a growth mindset

Having a limited mindset will teach

them to believe intelligence or talent is fixed and cannot be changed or improved upon. People with a limited mindset tend to give up when a challenge or problem occurs.

If your child has a growth mindset, however, they will believe that their abilities and skills can be improved through practise and hard work. This will lead to growth, success, a love of learning and greater resilience. So encourage your children based on the hard work and effort they have put into something, rather than on their innate talent.

Embrace the power of “yet”: “I can’t do cartwheels” becomes “I can’t do cartwheels . . . yet”.

#### 5. Help them to recognise God

There comes a sense of peace when they understand that there is something outside of themselves that’s bigger than them. When they recognise and accept the power of God, that He is able to guide and help them, they learn to trust in Someone, not just themselves.

Melody Tan is a passionate advocate for empowering mothers through connection, faith and digital engagement. She is the project leader for Mums At The Table, and lives in Sydney with her husband and their primary-school-aged son.





# ten positive affirmations



## for mums

I am exactly the mum my child needs.  
I am allowed to rest and recharge.  
I am in charge of my feelings. I get to choose my mood.  
I have the inner strength to face hard days.  
I am growing and learning every day.  
My personal goals matter too.  
I am grateful for the good things in my life.  
I deserve kindness—from myself and others.  
I trust my instincts and decisions.  
I give myself grace and space to breathe.

## to tell your kids

You are safe, loved and enough.  
You can do hard things.  
Your feelings matter.  
I believe in you.  
You are kind, smart and brave.  
It's okay to make mistakes—we learn from them.  
You bring joy to this world.  
I love watching you grow and try new ways of doing things.  
You are getting better every day.  
Your ideas and voice are important.





by Pip Lincolne

## 2 simple things that will make you feel like an *awesome mum*

**I**t's vital to notice the good bits and the progress you have made. Stop the juggle forward momentum occasionally. Turn and look over your shoulder as you work hard to adjust to the trickery that is constantly coming your way. Do this even if you occasionally drop the ball. Actually, especially if you drop the ball. And keep doing it right through your parenting years (ie for the rest of your life!).

When you look back and focus carefully, you will see that you are doing a pretty brilliant job of something that you have had very little schooling in. So know that.

There are lots of more formal ways of taking stock of your best mum—and

woman—moments, past and present. A snazzy leotard is not even required for many of the following exercises (but you can wear one if you like!). Here are two to choose from or you can try them both.

### 1. Mum moments/Me moments

Start collecting “Mum moments” and “Me moments”. Make note of the gains you are making by keeping a diary to track personal and parenting progress, even if you jot down just a few messily scribbled words. For example:

Mum moment: Said YES to my child when I often say NO without thinking.

Me moment: Sat in the sun at lunch-time and felt so much better for it.

Journalling can help you focus on and process thoughts and feelings, spot behavioural patterns, solve problems and set goals. This sort of Mum/Me journalling can also help you to appreciate when you are achieving and even surpassing those goals, because often we're on to the next challenge without congratulating ourselves on getting through the last one.

Flip back through the pages regularly to notice how much you're actually doing well and to refocus yourself on the moments that matter to you.

According to the experts, journalling has a whole bunch of physical and mental health benefits if you use it to help organise and process your thoughts.

"Scientific studies have shown it to be essentially a panacea for modern life," Hayley Phelan wrote in her 2018 article, "What's All This About Journalling?" in *The New York Times*.

"There are the obvious benefits, like a boost in mindfulness, memory and communication skills. But studies have also found that writing in a journal can lead to better sleep, a stronger immune

system, more self-confidence and a higher IQ."

Reflecting on life as both a woman and a mum, even via a few short phrases each day, is a super-simple way to love yourself a little bit more. In fact, journalling these positive experiences can prompt your brain to "relive" them and give you a helpful second dose of feel-good hormones.

If you find yourself loving the whole journalling thing (perhaps you are already an avid journaler), you could try a longer form of this excellent habit: Author Julia Cameron's "Morning Pages". Julia, author of *The Artist's Way*, recommends busting out "three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing" when you first wake up. She stresses that these pages are not supposed to be art, or even writing.

Morning Pages are an excellent way of getting whatever is swirling around in your head onto the page in one giant daily brain dump, freeing you up to think about other things and giving you some perspective on thoughts that might have been playing on your mind/

torturing you. I highly recommend trying this, if you have time for it . . . even one page is worth doing, if that is all you can manage. You will feel better, stronger and less lousy for it!

## 2. Three good things

Sometimes called the "What went well" exercise, this simple but genius habit can help you to notice the good job you are doing, even when your days seem to be a total shambles. Basically, you write down three good things you experienced each day, on a daily basis. For example:

1. Kiddo ate two-thirds of their dinner.
  2. Read a chapter of my new book on the bus.
  3. Snuck out to the shops by myself.
- Clearly yours will be different to the list above. Or not. They are all good things.

This activity cleverly worms its way into your thought processes and, before you know it, you're operating from a much more positive and curious default. You begin to realise what matters to you most, and gravitate towards making more time for those things.

When you're a parent, it can be extremely helpful to include the everyday meaningful moments you experienced with your child, however fleeting or tiny they might have been. Before you know it, you have a whole list of mum achievements and ace times you've spent together—quite the handy bucket list if you're stuck for something special to do together.

The benefits of this activity are long lasting. A 2005 study by psychologist Martin Seligman and colleagues, published in *American Psychologist*, found that writing about three good things was associated with an increase in happiness immediately after documenting the three things, as well as one week, one month, three months and six months later.

This is an edited extract from *Days Like These* by Pip Lincolne. Pip is a writer about mental health and creativity, best known for her popular blog *Meet Me At Mike's*.



# My gratitude list

Gratitude has been known to improve your mental wellbeing, helping to bring some sparkle back into your life.

Date:

Things that made me smile:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Things that I am thankful for:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



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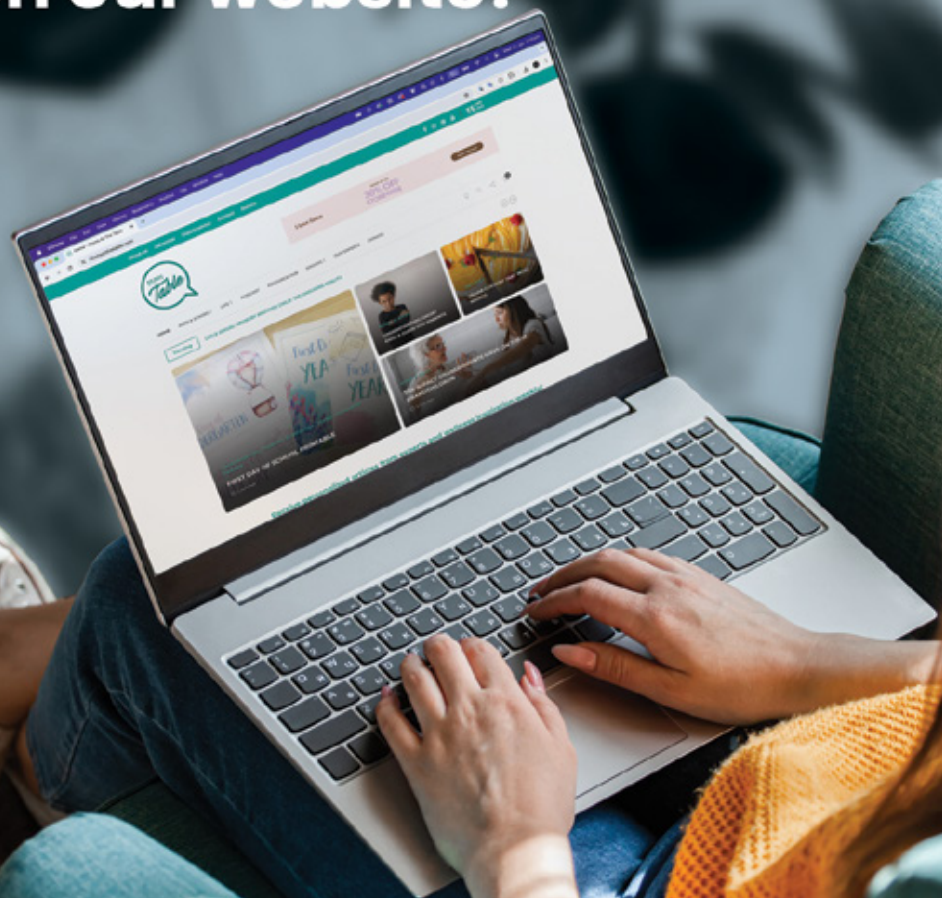
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