

STORY AT A GLANCE: Major new research and campaign exposes the hidden truths for hopeful, expectant and new parents.

Key research being released by the not-for-profit COPE (Centre of Perinatal Excellence) is set to shatter many myths surrounding pregnancy and early parenthood. Dr. Highet says there are tens of thousands of stories of hidden distress at each stage of the journey to parenthood.

Participants revealed extremely hard pregnancies - struggling with prolonged and severe morning sickness, family violence and body image. Others discussed “shattering”, “heartbreaking” loss through miscarriage and stillbirth. Many more described traumatic births, with the impact lasting for years. An alarming 75% of survey participants reported a tough first year of parenting, with experiences ranging from severe sleep deprivation to terrifying thoughts and outbursts of rage.

Dr. Nicole Highet – the Founder and CEO of COPE – says numerous people in the new research revealed they were battling anxiety and depression as a direct result of not being prepared for and supported through unexpected challenges.

STORY IN FULL: Major new research released today, 22 March 2022, by COPE (Centre of Perinatal Excellence) will shatter many myths and expose hidden truths around the experience of pregnancy, birth and early parenthood.

Dr. Nicole Highet, Founder and CEO of COPE said, “300,000 women give birth each year in Australia and behind this statistic are tens of thousands of stories of hidden distress.”

“Our new report reveals that hopeful, expectant and new parents face a wide range of challenges at every stage of their journey to parenthood. These are clearly having profound and often long-term impacts on emotional and mental wellbeing.”

1,899 Australians were part of the new survey. 614 provided COPE with extensive detail about their personal experiences. Dr. Nicole Highet said the new results are both very startling and a clear wakeup call that we all need to do much more to help expectant and new parents.

Dr. Highet said “The research clearly exposes an array of challenges that parents are not aware of and not prepared for. They are simply not spoken about openly.”

“One third of respondents had experienced the ‘physical and emotional rollercoaster’ of infertility. They reported balancing hope, managing despair, and adverse impacts on relationships, financial security and mental health. They said a very clear lack of understanding and empathy from friends, colleagues and health professionals, gravely affected their mental wellbeing.”

“The high prevalence of loss through miscarriage and stillbirth left many people in the research describing their experiences as “shattering”, “heartbreaking” and “traumatic”. Despite both being common - silence, taboo and stigma is clearly exacerbating mental health impacts in the immediate and longer term.”

Dr. Highet highlighted that pregnancy was far from the “glowing” experience that many hoped for and expected. She said numerous women reported severe morning sickness that sometimes lasted for the



full pregnancy, unwelcome changes to their bodies, and fear resulting from family violence whilst pregnant – leaving these expectant mothers both physically and emotionally vulnerable.

She said “This powerful research tells us that at each stage, the challenges are unexpected. This leaves people feeling totally unprepared, alone and very isolated in their experiences.”

Dr. Highet highlighted anxiety and depression during pregnancy was often identified retrospectively ... so it was not diagnosed or treated at the time. She pointed out that both expectant parents and health professionals were unaware of symptoms and often misattributed behaviour to being a ‘normal part of pregnancy’.

Dr. Highet said “The new research reveals that at the birth of their babies, expectations could not be further from the reality that unfolded for over one third (37%) of respondents. Birth trauma left new parents feeling “powerless” and “violated” due to the physical and emotional trauma they experienced. This was further compounded by the poor delivery of care and/or communication received from health professionals, which left new parents saying they felt “belittled”, “bullied and “betrayed”.

Dr Highet stated: “This suggests the lack of continuity of care and absence of clinical debriefing is contributing to high rates of PTSD, anxiety and depression at this critical entry point into parenthood. Untreated birth trauma can last for years or a lifetime and can deter parents from having more children.”

Life with a new baby brings the most challenges **as reported by 75% of respondents.**

Breastfeeding, coping with an unsettled baby, sleep deprivation, bonding and attachment difficulties - along with constant unsolicited and conflicting advice - were just some of the struggles identified by new parents in the research. Some described being terrified by thoughts of harm to their baby and intense feelings of rage.

All this suggests new parents are feeling unprepared and overwhelmed, as rates of postnatal stress, anxiety and depression surge in the first year after birth.

Dr Highet states: “The truth is the blissful experiences promoted by social media, magazines and movies are often far from reality. Confidence and self-esteem are detrimentally impacted when individuals believe they are the only ones not measuring up to these images of perfection.”

“So many feel alone and isolated in their experiences. Lack of awareness, shame and stigma prevent individuals from getting help or talking openly about what’s really going on for them, for fear of judgement by family, friends and health professionals. Some even fear losing their children.”

Dr Highet believes the results highlight the urgent need for an awareness campaign, also launched by COPE this week. The new campaign, *The Truth*, is ground-breaking and is the first of its kind internationally, as it exposes the range of challenges experienced across the five perinatal stages of trying to conceive: loss: pregnancy: birth and the first year of parenting.

Dr Highet asserts: “To date, there has been too narrow a focus on postnatal depression. At the postnatal stage it is too little, too late. A true preventative approach requires promoting the many challenges that parents may face along the entire journey to parenthood.”



“This is the first perinatal mental health campaign and organisation world-wide to take this important and fresh approach to health promotion, prevention and early intervention. The new campaign cleverly exposes the hidden emotions and provides people with access to information and referral pathways. Raw, honest, personal accounts of struggles as depicted in the campaign will enable people to identify with the experiences of others and reassure them they are not alone, and that help is available.”

COPE’s research also reveals the importance of awareness, education and routine screening for all hopeful, expectant and new parents. COPE says this is paramount to detect all those at risk so that timely and appropriate support can be made available.

To learn more just go to www.cope.org.au

[Media enquiries to: Media Key on 03 9769 6488 or 0409 420 112](#)
[Dr. Nicole Highet is available for interview](#)

Background information on COPE

The Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE) is Australia’s peak body in perinatal mental health. Responsible for the development of the Australian Clinical Practice Guidelines, COPE is a world leader in best practice innovation. The screening tool, iCOPE, facilitates universal screening to identify parents at risk or experiencing mental health conditions across a diverse range of population groups and health care settings. Innovative approaches to awareness and education are made available through campaigns and resources, including the Ready to Cope App for expectant and new parents. All programs are supported via national referral pathways through via the specialist e-COPE Directory.

COPE members, listed below, endorse and act in accordance with the Australian Clinical Practice Guidelines developed by COPE:

- *Australian College of Mental Health Nurses (ACMHN)*
- *Australian College of Midwives (ACM).*
- *Australian Psychological Society (APS)*
- *Maternal, Child & Family Health Nurses (MCAFHNA)*
- *Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA)*
- *Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG)*
- *Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)*
- *Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP)*

Background information on The Truth campaign

Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE) is devoted to providing support and reducing the impacts of emotional and mental health problems in the pre and postnatal periods.

The #thetruth video series has been created to raise awareness and help improve the lives of the many thousands of families currently affected by unexpected challenges on the path to parenthood.

These experiences can be debilitating, often devastating and are rarely talked about. COPE provides you with the truth, then connects you with honest and clear information to help you get the support your need.



“Because there is no shame in asking for help” – Jade

#The truth focuses on five key stages: infertility, perinatal loss, pregnancy, birth and early parenthood. Within these five stages are a range of related topics that explore each stage in more detail.

INFERTILITY: The truth is many people experience mental health challenges while trying to have a baby. Infertility can affect every part of your life. The experience of trying to get pregnant can be all-consuming, it can change your work life, your family life and put stress on friendships and relationships.

“The truth is infertility is an emotional and physical rollercoaster that never ends” – Melinda.

If you have been unsuccessful in trying to fall pregnant it's natural to experience feelings of frustration and disappointment. You may also feel angry, jealous or resentful of others around you, particularly towards those who seem to be able to become pregnant more quickly, effortlessly or accidentally. You may feel like no one understands what you are going through, but COPE is here to provide you with honest and clear information to help you get the support you need while trying to have a baby.

PERINATAL LOSS: The truth is many people experience mental health challenges after losing a baby. No one talks about the consuming grief, the sadness, the mixed feelings and the anger you feel after you lose a baby. Many people continue to carry the grief inside long after their loss.

“The truth is when you are going through something so deep and so dark it's very difficult” – Renata.

Often the emotions that you may experience after you lose a baby are minimised or not well understood by our family, friends or others in the community. This makes it even more difficult to process and make sense of your feelings. You are not alone. COPE is here to provide you with honest and clear information to help you get the support you need after losing a baby.

PREGNANCY: The truth is 1 in 5 women experience mental health challenges while pregnant. Many mothers have an idealised image of what their pregnancy might look like (thanks mostly to magazines and social media) while the reality is that no two pregnancies are the same.

“The truth is I could just see the other mums that they look fine and you're just struggling every single day”. – Jade.

Many people struggle physically and emotionally throughout their pregnancies. Anxiety and worry can be all consuming and replace the feelings of excitement and joy. These feelings are more common than you think, it's just that no one ever talks about it. COPE is here to provide you with honest and clear information to help you get the support you need during your pregnancy.

BIRTH: The truth is, unfortunately childbirth doesn't always go to plan. Many parents can be left feeling depleted, disappointed and experience mental health challenges after a difficult birth experience. It can be lonely and confusing time.

“The truth is the birth didn't go to plan, I felt violated and betrayed” – Melissa.

You may feel like your experience is unique, but you are not alone. Many people who have experienced birth trauma simply choose to never talk about it. COPE is here to provide you with honest and clear information to help you get the support you need.



EARLY PARENTHOOD: The truth is many unexpected challenges come with being a new parent. Without experience to fall back on many new parents feel like they are struggling and worry that they aren't up to the challenge.

"The truth is there is shame tied up with women being really brutally honest about what parenthood and motherhood is like." – Nami.

Not talking and acknowledging problems can lead to new parents to feeling isolated and shut out to the reality of life with a new baby. COPE is here to provide you with honest and clear information to help you get the support you need after having a baby.



KEY POINTS FROM DR. NICOLE HIGHET IN RELATION TO THIS STORY:

- 1) Hidden challenges are affecting hopeful, expectant and new parents at each stage of the journey to Parenthood. These are often unexpected as no one is talking about it.
- 2) ***Specifying what the range of challenges are*** at each stage actually are, is key, and what is compounding them. This underpins the whole strategy. People tune into the information that is relevant to them - so we are presenting it to them in this way. The campaign is also supported by activity that has been revealed to be compounding the problems - low awareness amongst parents, health professionals lack of support, lack of screening (depending on the issues) - again all negatively affecting health outcomes.
- 3) These identified challenges are impacting on mental health outcomes, increasing distress, anxiety and depression. Feelings of failure and fear of judgment (including having children removed) is leading people to stay silent. As a result people are left feeling they are the only ones going through the challenges - which is simply not the case. That's why this campaign is about exposing the untold truths and letting people know that they are not alone and that there is supports available and COPE is the place to come for more evidence-based information about the issues and direction to support.
- 4) The research results emphasise the need to take a different approach to perinatal mental health promotion. Traditionally perinatal mental health campaigns have focussed on postnatal depression only. This is not only is too limited in terms of scope of the problems, but also too late in terms of prevention (baby already arrived, illness already developed). It is vital that we identify the stressors and challenges that occur earlier in the journey, assure people they are not the only ones who experience this, and help them identify supports and services. Not just focus on illness.
- 5) This is the first perinatal mental health campaign and organisation world-wide to take this novel approach to health promotion, prevention and early intervention. The campaign cleverly exposes the hidden struggles and provided people with access to information and referral pathways. Raw, honest personal accounts of struggles as depicted in the campaign will enable people to identify with the experiences of others and reassure them they are not alone and that help is available.