

Gidget House: Free mental health service for new, expectant parents open at Kareena Hospital

Pregnancy and the birth of a child are often described as the most joyous time for parents, but for some it can be the hardest, most anxious and even a dangerous time. Now, a service has launched in the Shire to support those needing a hand.

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Rebecca McMartin suffered from perinatal depression throughout her pregnancy and slowly recovered during her post-partum year thanks to psychological help from Gidget House. Picture: Ashleigh Tullis

Pregnancy and the birth of a child are often described as the most joyous time for parents, but for some it can be the hardest, most anxious and even a dangerous time.

Rebecca McMartin suffered from peri-natal depression throughout her pregnancy and slowly recovered during her post-partum year thanks to psychological help from Gidget House.

The Gidget Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation that supports the emotional wellbeing of expectant and new parents to ensure they receive timely, appropriate and specialist care.

In 2022, the foundation opened a Gidget House – which offers parents access to GP-referred, free specialist post-natal counselling sessions – at Kareena Private Hospital and officially launched the service on Wednesday.

So far, the service has had nearly 100 clients.



North Mental Health Worker Ross Jackson (L-R), Gidget House CEO Arabella Gibbins, New Mother Rebecca McMartin, and Kareena Hospital CEO Stephen Wignmore in the new Gidget House consultation room. Picture: Ashleigh Tullis

Rebecca McMartin started using the psychology service and said "Gidget was the safe hands that caught me every time I fell" when "pregnancy pulled the rug from under me".

Ms McMartin experienced a disconnect from her baby, overanalysed symptoms, became anxious something bad was going to happen to her baby, feared the unknown, struggled to sleep and couldn't make decisions.

"That sense of shame, distress and overwhelm, and the all-consuming sense of failure I felt as a woman and mother when I didn't know how to survive, Gidget was there for me," she said.

"And when that fog started to lift and I finally started to recover, Gidget was there for me too. These services embedded in hospitals like Kareena aren't a luxury, they are a necessity and they save lives.

"Sometimes pregnancy can be the happiest time of your life and sometimes it can be the most painful and hardest time.

"It is okay to acknowledge that. It doesn't mean mothers or dads don't love their children, it just means we need a bit more support."



Rebecca McMartin speaks about the help she received. Picture: Ashleigh Tullis

Kareena Hospital CEO Stephen Wignmore said he was proud to have the service available to parents in the shire.

"Typically our service can discontinue when patients are discharged, but the obstetric journey is much more special," he said.

"Parenthood is incredibly rewarding but is a very challenging time. The ability to maintain contact and relationships with our parents after discharge is very important."

Gidget Foundation Australia research found one in three expectant and new parents in Sydney said they needed the most support between 3-12 months post-natal, while half did not have the emotional or practical support from their family and friends.

Ms McMartin said she had a history of anxiety and depression and she "knew" she had to reach out for help.

"Knowing there was someone there for me and there was an appointment coming up helped me hold on, because I knew once I talked to someone then maybe it would get better," she said.



One of Gidget Foundation's founders Zarnie Berthold spoke about her friend's legacy. Picture: Ashleigh Tullis

"My advice is, start talking and don't stop talking. Ask for help and don't stop asking for help, because there is help available and you are not alone. You don't have to earn the help and you deserve the support."

One of Gidget Foundation's founders Zarnie Berthold said the organisation started after her close friend, whose nickname was Gidget, tragically took her own life while experiencing postnatal depression.

Gidget's friends and family started fundraising to support services for new parents but there were very few available, and they wanted to reduce the stigma of peri-natal depression and anxiety.

In 2013, the foundation opened the first Gidget House in North Sydney and has expanded to 23 houses in NSW, Victoria and Queensland with more planned across Australia.

"We also have a successful Gidget midwives program, Telehealth service, a group therapy program and Gidget virtual support groups," Ms Berthold said.



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