

# The enduring effects of the global pandemic will not be confined to long COVID, says perinatal psychologist

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Clinical perinatal psychologist Lucy Frankham has captured important details of the impact of COVID on Australian women. Credit: University of New England

A University of New England researcher believes young mothers, their children and families swept up in its wake now need urgent support.

During her Ph.D. research on birth experiences and birth-related trauma, clinical perinatal psychologist Lucy Frankham has inadvertently captured important details of the impact of COVID on Australian women. Her findings paint a picture of a "lonely, isolating experience" and antenatal depression rates Australia-wide more than double (15.9%) the usual rate (7%) and almost three times higher in Melbourne (19%) among the 188 study participants.

Lucy is now recommending additional screening, assessment and assistance for families that were pregnant during the peak of the crisis in 2020 and 2021, to minimize the multi-generational physical, social and economic fall-out.

"Extending access to programs such as nurse home visits, that support families with health, education and early parenting, may be one way to combat some of these issues," she said. "The government should also reinstate the additional 10 psychology sessions that were available under Medicare's Better Access Scheme during the COVID crisis, as the need for these is still there."

In her role with the Center for Perinatal Psychology, Lucy said she continues to see new mothers experiencing depression and trauma two years after birth. Children are also presenting with anxiety and obsessive behaviors that can be attributed to the pandemic.

"We know that significant stress during pregnancy adversely impacts the mental health of the mother and infant," Lucy said. "We also know that antenatal depression is a risk factor for postnatal depression, and a mother's postnatal depression is a risk factor for family discord, relationship breakdowns and subsequent antenatal depression."

"Depression in pregnancy or postnatally is also linked to impairments in mother-infant bonding and attachment, so it impacts the relationship, the mother and the developing infant."

"In addition, [young children](#) who have experienced several years of being told there are dangerous germs everywhere, not to touch things and to wash their hands excessively have been adversely affected by stress and social isolation."

Women pregnant during the height of the pandemic had fewer routine pregnancy checks, fewer face-to-face consultations, and restrictions placed on birthing practices, with some even birthing alone. "Such measures served to decrease support for mothers at a time when it was needed most," Lucy said.

"They were unable to develop relationships with other mothers because there were no antenatal groups, and they didn't start mother's and playgroups after their babies were born. For many women, birth during COVID was a traumatic event, and contrary to what we know scientifically ameliorates depression and other complications in pregnancy and postnatally."

The impacts, Lucy predicts, will continue to be revealed in women and children.

"It's likely we will have cohorts of children with higher rates of behavioral and emotional difficulties such as [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#), and potentially other health issues caused by stress," she said. "Children whose mothers have had postnatal depression are more likely to develop asthma and [respiratory problems](#), impaired immune system responses, and neurodevelopmental issues.

"We are also likely to see women reconsidering whether they want

another child, women being more vulnerable to difficult pregnancies or births, and difficulties within marriages."

However, such profound repercussions are not on the health radar.

"The women I work with are still struggling and feel forgotten," Lucy said. "We need more screening than ever, because [early intervention](#) is everything, and we need to be urgently investing in evidence-based programs to support families. The long-term economic cost of perinatal [depression](#) on the community is considerable and the burden on families is significant."

Lucy's research findings have been published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* and the *Open Journal of Depression*.

**More information:** Lucy J. Frankham et al, The Impact of COVID-19 Related Distress on Antenatal Depression in Australia, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20064783](#)

Lucy J. Frankham et al, Antenatal Depression and the Experiences of Australian Women in the Maternity System during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Open Journal of Depression* (2021). [DOI: 10.4236/ojd.2021.104010](#)

Provided by University of New England

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