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## INTRODUCING MOTHERHOOD AND JOURNEYS

### *My motherhood and journeys into the great awesome unknown!*

I thought I would start out on our journey of discovering burnout, mum-life, working-mum life and all the glorious in between with a bit of a discussion about my motherhood. Because sure, I can qualify myself with skills learned at uni, but there's nothing like the trenches and supporting thousands of mums along the way!

In this opening chapter you'll read a bit about:

- my motherhood journey
- burnout — how it can show up and surprise us
- support systems and stress
- patriarchy in motherhood (a quick little chat and eye opener)
- insights into healing yourself and vitality.

## Observations from before I took the leap into motherhood

When I graduated from RMIT University way back in 2002, I thought motherhood was just another linear element in our life, a trajectory that a lot of women traverse along because it is the 'done' thing. As a country kid growing up in regional Victoria, I was encouraged to study one of three professions: doctor, lawyer or stockbroker. These were perceived as my way out of the country life and into a 'safe job'.

My mum worked at the hospital in town as a sonographer and I would often go there after school to wait for a lift home (town was some 45 kilometres away from our home). Interestingly, I began to observe the difficulties professional women experienced in that environment, and how they were always juggling and figuring out how to 'manage it all'.

When I was 15, I went to a chiropractor for the first time and, as well as getting rid of the pain I'd been experiencing in my feet for a long time, I learned that they could choose their own working hours. Subconsciously, choosing chiropractic — a career that is supportive of working mums — was a no-brainer. Not only had it been modelled to me as an easy working-mum choice but having been around inter-generational models of working mothers, I guess I felt well placed to 'have it all'.

As a 23-year-old chiropractor, I gave it little regard, however, and began on my lightning-fast career trajectory. This took me to the other side of Australia, all the way to Perth, where I met some amazing women who have influenced my motherhood. Love stories abound about how we all met ... but I'll save that for another time!

At university, when I was studying chiropractic, there was zero focus on matrescence (the beautiful shift and change from woman to mother, something I'll be discussing in depth in [chapter 3](#)) and the stages of motherhood. We were taught about the pregnant mother, but not how to care for the post-partum one. We were taught about newborn babies, infants and toddlers. We were taught about the hormonal flux of adolescence. There was no highlight reel of the elements of motherhood we needed to be supportive of. It was pretty much glossed over. This really needs to change if we are going to support mothers in the way they need us to.

When I began practising, I was blessed to take over a private family practice and I began working closely with mums, both for themselves and as parents of the children under my care. It was here that I witnessed, firsthand, the desire of mothers to have all of the best things for their children, including health.

Mums would constantly chase the to-do list that helped them to keep their child/ren healthy, with a complete disregard for their own health. There was so much focus on doing everything for their family that stopping to care for themselves was never a priority that made it onto the completed to-do list.

This pattern would keep occurring until they fell in a heap, which is where I would step in as part of the team putting them back together.

Sound familiar? I'm sure it does for some of you. And probably not for others.

Interestingly, this was modelled to me in practice as the norm for all mums. It took until I became a mother, and explored how I could maintain my own personal vitality, to dig into these concepts of health for mums. The dichotomy of not being selfish, but choosing to care for myself as well as my child — which may be different from the expected norm in standard Western society — was a hard pill to swallow. The true expression of both mum-guilt and the 'perfect mother' myth had ingrained themselves in my thoughts around what a mother was, and it began to impact my motherhood.

I'd seen my business partner and best friend traverse a multiple pregnancy, and how the system had expectations of her to birth a certain way because she was having triplets. She sought out health professionals who supported her choice to have a vaginal birth, which somewhat made her an outlier. This then formed an element of minority fatigue throughout her mothering journey. Add to this the expectation that, because she became a mum to three amazing little humans, she was supposed to constantly be equally fully fatigued and extremely grateful.

She, however, chose something different for herself and her family. For her, work was a large part of her values system and it allowed her to feel herself amid the chaos of three tiny humans. This modelled to me the 'anti-perfect mother' myth. There were times, of course, where the mum-guilt associated with any and all decisions around return to work — or not performing at work after the kids had been up at night and she hadn't slept well — was very real. The reality of the stress of trying to maintain a perfect work-life-mum balance was extraordinary, and this was well before the crazy times of the 2020s.

## II PAUSE MOMENT

- **Did you observe friends/family/colleagues before you became a mum, who in retrospect shaped your thoughts on mothering and motherhood?**
- **What pre-framed ideas (like fatigue, tiredness, joy, playfulness, connection, isolation) did you take into motherhood?**

## My journey into motherhood

My journey into motherhood was an unplanned but much-longed-for surprise. A wedding night baby, in fact. I know ... totally ironic for the health professional to have that happen, but hey, apparently it's a thing. Leading up to motherhood, I sold my practice of eight years to my best friend, got married (and pregnant) and shortly afterwards my husband and I moved to Malaysia for a work opportunity for him.

Massive life change. I was exceptionally grateful for the opportunities it offered, but it was a turbulent time too.

We moved to Johor Bahru just after my 20-week scan, with everyone telling me how lucky I was to be gifted all of this time off before the baby came to prepare for their imminent arrival. Even though I'd

spent the preceding 12 years working with mums, in retrospect my preparation was, ironically, not exactly what I needed. I was highly focused on the birth and trying to dispel ingrained beliefs that I couldn't birth vaginally due to an off-the-cuff comment from a radiologist who had looked at my spine films when I was 15.

As you can imagine, being hyper-aware of the role that our inner-language can play in our birthing outcomes, I was genuinely focused on shifting that. I worked with a hypnobirthing instructor and a doula, and when I was in Australia, chatted to the midwives and an OB, relaying my fears and concerns, and acknowledging the place I was coming from prior to my baby's birth.

Needless to say, the concept of motherhood at the other side of the birth didn't really cross my mind. Not even once did we have a conversation as a couple or even within my inner circle of what to expect in my motherhood journey. I find it so interesting that I seriously spent more time worrying about the pram I chose than I did about how to parent and mother once our babe was born.

I know I'm not alone in this. On reflection, and chatting with thousands of mums since, this isn't a solo story. Many mums out there definitely go in with a similar thought construct: if I birth this babe a certain way, then all will be perfect.

This strongly feeds into the 'perfect mother' myth.

My journey into motherhood was definitely not what I expected. I travelled from Malaysia back to Perth by myself at 35+6 weeks — that is, one day before I would no longer have been allowed to fly because of the gestation of my pregnancy. I left my husband behind in Malaysia, and had three weeks by myself. The fear of going into labour and him not being able to get there in time was big. I'm sure that this led to a heightened stress response on my way into the birthing experience, and possibly the outcomes of birth too.

My birthing began with a hind water leak (a small water leak, not a massive gush) at 40+5 (so 5 days over the expected due date) that went on for a few days. I was in and out of the birthing centre for check-ups over those days. I was trying my hardest with everything to avoid an induction as I understood so intently the cascade of intervention that can happen after that time.

Nevertheless, I ended up being induced, and having a long labour. My doula was present, and every time she left the room to move her car (it went for 18 hours), someone would come in and check me. All the pressures of time were placed on me, and the experience was pretty much the complete opposite of what I had envisaged. While I ultimately avoided a caesarean, the trauma, the use of forceps and ending up in a stark theatre prepped for a caesarean really impacted my initial bonding with my child.

As soon as she was placed on my chest, I felt appreciation for her safe arrival. I felt an element of love, but I didn't feel that overwhelming, life-changing 'kapow' moment that everyone told me I would. I had super protective instincts around my child, yet I didn't feel the love-bubble gush I expected. This alone was enough to start my mum-guilt journey. At the time, I didn't realise I didn't have it, but on consideration, my love grew and grew rather than rushing in.

Over the next couple of weeks, we packed up our house in Perth so we could rent it out when we repatriated overseas again, navigated new parenthood, had both sets of parents visit from interstate, celebrated Christmas and then flew back to Malaysia with a 20-day-old child. It felt 'normal' at the time, but on reflection it was pretty bloody crazy.

No wonder I felt a little lost.

To top it off, I had all my people trying to help me with advice on what they perceived was or wasn't working with my newborn.

Have you heard these ones?

- Why is she feeding so much?
- Why is feeding taking so long?
- Why is she so small?

- You should be doing ...
- You shouldn't be doing ...
- You do this with a nappy ...
- You do this other thing with a dummy ...
- You wrap her this or that way ...

I was thrust into discovering that my own personal, good-enough mother concept was based on external elements of the newborn phase like sleep, poo, feeding and settledness. And I pretty much felt like a bit of a failure because, while for years I'd been able to support mothers with the health of their kids, my own child didn't fit the perfect 'box' of what a 'good' baby does. This common societal measure of a good mother being reliant upon how her child shows up for certain benchmarks really fuelled my unhappiness at the time.

Moving back to Malaysia was isolating. Comparatively, I imagine it was a little like birthing during lockdown and remaining home all the time, with minimal community connection and support being offered. I haven't had to live through significant lockdown in Australia, but in conversation and while supporting women who have, it feels like I had the same brain-based trauma response they experienced. I began doing the things that I thought good mothers did. I exercised, I cooked, I responded to my child as she needed and I 'wifed' like a champion.

And yet, I felt like I wasn't a good mother because my daughter thought sleep was for the weak. There wasn't a sleep book I didn't read, there wasn't a friend I didn't lean into, there wasn't advice I didn't think to add to my daily 'should-do'. But not much helped. Ironically.

And yet, here I am, writing a book on supporting mums to choose their own adventure. I am so thankful for the crazy early introduction to motherhood, as it certainly shaped my journey, my learnings and my passion for mums.

## Support systems and stress

While my support systems were there, I was creating stress for myself and within my family because I was striving to fill a 'perfect child and perfect mother' ideology. It wasn't a conscious thing. I just did it because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. I know I'm not alone here. It's well researched. It's the intensive mothering ideology that we will explore as we move through this book, and how it impacts the stress load of mothering. This ideology is creating a cycle of burned-out working mums trying to do and be all to everyone, except for themselves. A bit more on that soon.

Moving through this as an individual, and reflecting on it over the years since my first child was born, highlights to me how, even as a highly knowledgeable mother, this matrescence period can really impact us, our future health and the lens through which we view motherhood.

As a mum, the stress load of life external to our 'self', and internal within our specific environment can impact us so innately that it alters our health, our vitality, our zest and, ultimately, our mothering. The amazing support systems we are gifted by our Western culture can be lifechanging. They can literally turn a really crappy, depressive and anxious experience into something joyful and vital.

The support systems offered to mothers, as reported anecdotally in my practice, have at times been overwhelming, and 'too much'. As mums have told me, there can be conflicting advice, given within short time frames, that can raise anxiety levels. And when mothers look externally to find all of the answers, it can also be a hugely overwhelming experience. Instead, giving ourselves permission to listen within, to listen to our calm and that inner voice, can allow us to support ourselves in a way that suits us.

The level of stress that comes from a lack of our own knowledge and because we continually have to source information from external sources can be the first step towards burnout in my experience. When we then add in mum-guilt and returning to work, it's a recipe for disaster.

**NEWBORN PHASE OF MOTHERING**

+

**SUPPORT SYSTEM STRESS**

+

**STRONG EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

**= A PRIME RECIPE FOR BURNOUT!**

Unsurprisingly, my daughter Matilda one day began to sleep, and we then decided to jump on the child number two rollercoaster. I mean, of course we did, ha ha. This journey was completely different and I often reflect on my second birth as being my healing delivery. No intervention, the instant love was there and the shift to a family with two children was a wholly different experience.

And while this was a healing birth, it didn't mean that I didn't get stressed ... that I didn't search outside of me for answers on how things were going and what I should be doing. It just meant I began with a little bit of a head start on the time before.

## **II PAUSE MOMENT**

- **I viewed my second birth as a 'healing birth', making up for the first one. Did you do that too?**
- **Learning to listen to my gut instinct took time and patience. The first time it was about deciding not to use controlled crying. Do you listen to your gut instinct?**

## **From burnout to vitality**

The burnout in my world didn't happen until well after the newborn years. I had returned to work, opened a practice, traversed difficulty navigating a 'normal life' back in Australia ... and some familial stress was thrown in for good measure.

It was a recipe for burnout. It kinda crept up on me, and had to yell at me to really get my attention. It actually happened prior to COVID, and it just kinda got a kick along and continued when that whole debacle happened.

Lockdown life, particularly in Australia, is a recipe for neurological burnout. Healing from it, and learning how to regain my joy, fun, vitality and health was amazing. And this journey from burnout to vitality is what this book is all about.

Each foray into motherhood comes with its own challenges and wins. It presents opportunities for growth and expansion, discovery and a sense of awakening and reflection for yourself. This reflection on my own journey, the re-introduction of mountains of neurological reading and information about