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Platform launched to help young mothers struggling during COVID-19

The [Messages for Mothers \(M4M\)](#) platform launched by the [Perinatal Mental Health Project \(PMHP\)](#) is a one-stop online resource developed in response to COVID-19 and the lack of targeted messaging for vulnerable mothers who are concerned for their children, families and themselves.

The platform curates simple content that answers common questions like "Must I wear a mask? Will I get a child support grant? How do I explain COVID-19 to my children?", and provides links to essential advice, information and support. Besides physical health, parenting and mental health – including some resources on domestic violence – it offers specially crafted mindfulness podcasts and helpline repositories.

In creating M4M, the PMHP – based at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Alan J Flisher Centre for Public Mental Health in the Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health – teamed up with other organisations that work closely with and have resources and experience in supporting mothers. These are [Embrace](#), Flourish, [Grow Great](#) and [Side by Side](#).

Many of the women they are targeting also face overcrowding, gender-based violence and food insecurity. On the [M4M website](#), these women can find immediate help and information in three main areas: maternal and mental health, physical health, and parenting in the pandemic.

To offset the limitations of high data costs, M4M has developed shorter graphic message versions of their articles. They've also used technology to shrink their audio resources, such as the mental health and mindfulness podcasts.

"We're actively campaigning that the materials are made available on zero-rated websites and on the National Department of Health WhatsApp line," noted PMHP director, Associate Professor Simone Honikman. "We plan now to move into a phase of getting the messages out on radio, either as pre-recordings that can be prepared or with live interviews with experts who speak a range of South African languages," said Honikman.

M4M's work continues PMHP's core mission which is to support the integration of quality maternal mental healthcare into mother and child initiatives in low- and middle-income settings. To accomplish their mission, they have four focus areas: advocacy for action, strengthening of maternal mental healthcare systems, generating knowledge and building the capacity of service providers.

"Prior to COVID-19, the prevalence of depression and anxiety in pregnant and postnatal women was about one in three. For each mental health condition separately, the rate was about one in five, but there's a lot of co-morbidity. This is based on PMHP's research at our service site in the Hanover Park Midwife Obstetrics Unit where we used diagnostic tools to assess for these mental health conditions," said Honikman.

"We also want to address domestic violence as there has been an enormous escalation of this since lockdown, and the negative associations with mental health and maternal health, and child physical outcomes are well documented."

Working with other partners, Honikman is also helping to develop the messaging component of the "National Framework and Guidelines for Maternal and Neonatal Care During a Crisis: COVID-19 response" for the director of Maternal and Neonatal Health at the National Department of Health, Dr Manala Makua.

This component has been designed to be adapted for potential future crises.

ENDS

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