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Making Space in Parenthood: testing the effectiveness of a 5-week self-compassion intervention in the postnatal period

Submission date
16/09/2025

Recruitment status
Recruiting

Registration date
18/09/2025

Overall study status
Ongoing

Last Edited
17/09/2025

Condition category
Mental and Behavioural Disorders

[X] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[ ] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
Becoming a parent can be a joyful but also stressful experience, especially during the first year of a baby's life. Many parents feel pressure to be perfect and may struggle with self-criticism, social pressures or infant related pressures. This study aims to evaluate a 5-week self-compassion training designed to help postpartum parents cope with these challenges, improve their wellbeing, and support their baby's development.

Who can participate?
Parents of a baby aged 1 to 9 months at the start of the training who have sufficient understanding of Dutch

What does the study involve?
Participants will take part in a 5-week group training program focused on self-compassion in parenting. Each session lasts 2 hours and includes mindfulness exercises, practical tools, and group discussions. To evaluate the program, participants will be asked to complete online questionnaires at four timepoints: before the program begins, immediately after the program ends, 2 months later and 6 months post-intervention. After each session, participants will also complete a short feedback questionnaire.
A separate group of parents who do not participate in the training will be recruited as a control group. These parents will complete the same questionnaires at the same time points, but will not receive the training. They will be matched to the intervention group.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
Benefits may include:
1. Learning practical tools for managing stress and pressure in early parenthood
2. Gaining support from other parents
3. Developing greater self-kindness and awareness as a parent
There are no known risks associated with participating in this study.

Where is the study run from?
The study is conducted by Ghent University in collaboration with AZ Sint-Lucas Ghent (Belgium)

When is the study starting and how long will it run?
October 2024 to August 2028

Who is funding the study?
The study is funded by Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO): G071624N

Who is the main contact?
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Additional identifiers

Protocol serial number
G071624N

Study information

Scientific Title
Making Space in Parenthood (MSP): development and matched-control evaluation of a 5-week self-compassion intervention for postpartum parents

Acronym
MSP

Study objectives
Primary hypothesis:
Compared with a matched control group, postpartum parents who complete the 5-week self-compassion program will show greater improvements in parental self-compassion at post-intervention.

Secondary (exploratory) hypotheses:
Compared with the control group, intervention participants are expected to report broader benefits in parental mental health and parenting and their infants are expected to show more favorable outcomes in early mental-health–related domains (e.g., self-regulation). These effects are expected to be maintained at 2- and 6-month follow-up assessments.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
1. Approved 03/06/2025, Ethics committee UZ Ghent (C. Heymanslaan 10, Gent, 9000, Belgium; +32 (0)9 332 33 36; ethisch.comite@uzgent.be), ref: ONZ-2025-0099

2. Approved 04/03/2025, Ethics committee AZ Sint-Lucas Gent (Groenebriel 1, Gent, 9000, Belgium; +32 (0)92245490; cme@azstlucas.be), ref: 2025-6

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Pre-post-follow-up design (including two follow-ups) for the intervention group, with a matched control group recruited from the general population completing assessments at the same timepoints

Study type(s)
Prevention, Treatment

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Postpartum parents experiencing challenges related to early parenthood (child regulatory problems, parental exhaustion, parental self-criticism), with a focus on improving parental wellbeing and supporting infant mental health during the first year after birth

Interventions
The MSP program supports parents in developing skills to manage the challenges of early parenthood.

The five-session training (each 2 hours) includes:
Session 1: Self-Compassion as a Powerful Foundation
Session 2: From Autopilot to Mindful with Your Baby
Session 3: Loving-Kindness in Parenthood
Session 4: Common Humanity
Session 5: Living Parenthood with Heart and Intention

The program helps parents cultivate self-compassion in daily life and parenting by offering practical tools and a safe space to share experiences. Each session includes guided mindfulness meditation, self-reflection exercises (e.g., writing), and psychoeducation on applying self-compassion in parenting. Sessions are led by two clinical psychologists experienced in mindfulness. The series starts with an introduction and ends with a future-oriented session. The core content is in sessions 2–4, focusing on the three core components of self-compassion.

To evaluate the program, questionnaires will be administered at four time points: before the program (pre-assessment), immediately after (post-assessment), 8 weeks after completion (follow-up 1), and 6 months after completion (follow-up 2). A matched control group will be recruited separately from the general population. The control group will complete the same questionnaires at the same time intervals as the intervention group.

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
Parental self-compassion assessed using the Self-Compassion Scale adapted to the parenting context before the program (pre-assessment), immediately after (post-assessment), 8 weeks after completion (follow-up 1), and 6 months after completion (follow-up 2).

Key secondary outcome(s)
Measured before the program (pre-assessment), immediately after (post-assessment), 8 weeks after completion (follow-up 1), and 6 months after completion (follow-up 2) unless stated otherwise:

1. Perceived social pressure measured with the Perceived Parental Social Pressure Scale
2. Parenting perfectionism measured with the Self-Oriented Parenting Perfectionism subscale of the Multidimensional Parenting Perfectionism Questionnaire
3. Emotion regulation strategies measured with the Emotion Regulation Inventory
4. Postnatal depressive symptoms assessed with the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS)
5. Parental stress measured with two items referring to (a) stress in the parenting context and (b) stress related to other aspects of life
6. Parental burnout assessed with the Brief Parental Burnout Scale
7. Vitality measured with the Subjective Vitality Scale
8. Parental sense of competence measured with three items from the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale
9. Mindful parenting measured using the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting Scale (IM-P), adapted to infants
10. Parental sensitive responsiveness assessed with the Parental Responsiveness Scale
11. Emotional reactions to infant crying measured with the My Emotions Questionnaire
12. Infant temperament and self-regulation assessed using the Infant Behavior Questionnaire – Revised (IBQ-R) and three additional items on sleep, feeding and crying

13. Dispositional mindfulness assessed with the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) as a predictor at T1
14. Acceptability of the program using questions like for example "Do you feel you've taken something of lasting value from this program?", and by adding an open question at the post-assessment
15. Acceptability of the program in detail assessed using a short evaluation scale at the end of each session

Completion date
01/08/2028

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
1. Parent of a baby aged 1 to 9 months at the start of the training
2. Proficient in Dutch language

Participant type(s)
Healthy volunteer, Patient, Other

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Adult

Lower age limit
18 Years

Upper age limit
65 Years

Sex
All

Key exclusion criteria
1. Infant's age outside the 1–9 month range at the start of the training
2. Insufficient proficiency in Dutch language
3. Current severe psychopathology requiring specialized treatment

Date of first enrolment
22/09/2025

Date of final enrolment
01/02/2028

Locations

Countries of recruitment
Belgium

Study participating centre
AZ Sint-Lucas Gent
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Sponsor information

Organisation
Ghent University

ROR
https://ror.org/00cv9y106

Funder(s)

Funder type
Government

Funder Name
Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek

Alternative Name(s)
Research Foundation Flanders, Flemish Research Foundation, Research Foundation – Flanders, Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek - Vlaanderen, The FWO, Het FWO, FWO

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location
Belgium

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study will be available upon reasonable request from Lumein Hillewaert (Lumein.Hillewaert@ugent.be)

IPD sharing plan summary

Available on request