

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

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Registration date 18/09/2025	Overall study status Ongoing	<input type="checkbox"/> Protocol
Last Edited 17/09/2025	Condition category Mental and Behavioural Disorders	<input type="checkbox"/> Statistical analysis plan
		<input type="checkbox"/> Results
		<input type="checkbox"/> Individual participant data
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 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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Contact information

Type(s)

Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

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Additional identifiers

Clinical Trials Information System (CTIS)

Nil known

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

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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

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

Primary study design

Interventional

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

Groenebriel 1

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