



Kimberly Herlocker, Amy Bunton, and Gwyn Fletcher in the AMITA Health Women's and Children's Hospital.

Motherhood 2.0

*AMITA Health's Perinatal Intensive Outpatient Program
Is Helping to Redefine Motherhood by Offering State-of-the-Art Treatment for
Mental Illnesses Associated with Childbirth*

BY LISA STAMOS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM PRISCHING

Welcoming a child into the world ought to be one of the greatest moments in a woman's life. Yet the physical, hormonal, and other life or situational challenges around pregnancy make women more vulnerable to mental illness before, during, and after childbirth. As many as 1 in 5 women worldwide experience some type of maternal perinatal mood and anxiety disorder. PMADs—perinatal mood and anxiety disorders—may include postpartum depression, postpartum anxiety, postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder, postpartum bipolar, postpartum psychosis, and suicide ideation.

Estimates are that 7 in 10 women hide or downplay their symptoms. Without understanding, support, and treatment, these mental illnesses can have a devastating impact on the entire family over time. For women who miscarry or have a stillbirth, roughly 25% experience grief and postpartum

depression. Maternal mental disorders are treatable, and AMITA Health has launched a successful solution for moms in need of care and treatment. Dads are welcome, too.

AMITA Health St. Alexius Medical Center in Hoffman Estates has developed one of only a small handful of Perinatal Intensive Outpatient (IOP) Programs in the nation. A part of Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital, the program and staff are housed in the Women and Children's Hospital, which helps enable a patient to minimize an already-highly stigmatized situation—mental illness—rather than attending programs in a larger hospitalized population. For moms who bring their infants to treatment programs and meetings, going into a child-friendly entrance at the Women's and Children's Hospital helps.

"The perinatal program is near and dear to our hearts," Clay Chia said. Chia is the president and CEO of AMITA Health Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital. "It combines the excellence of our behavioral medicine programming with the services at our Women's and Children's Hospital. It demonstrates the connectedness of mind and body. The changes in individual's lives are nothing short of miraculous. It exemplifies the mission of AMITA Health," he said.

Chair of AMITA Health Obstetric Excellence Board and Perinatal Safety Commission, Angelos Alexander, D.O., says that postpartum depression and depression in general are very real conditions that can result in serious consequences for patients and their families if not treated quickly and properly. "AMITA Health is at the forefront of early diagnosis and treatments for all forms of depression and mood disorders," Alexander said.

IOP Medical Director and Attending Physician, Dr. Xiaohong Yu is a board-certified specialist in psychiatry and sleep medicine. She's also a mom of two daughters. "I am honored to be one of the members of our IOP program at ABBHH, where we offer a host of treatment options for our patients, including therapy, group therapy, family sessions, and case management. Typical treatment with medication is also an option, but it can also be of concern to patients because they worry that the medication could cause harm to their child," Yu explained. "The program has the ability to provide them thorough information on each medication so that they may better analyze and weigh its benefits and side effects and eventually see them through their journey successfully. A family unit's overall well-being is also a priority with our treatment," Yu said.

To better understand the journey of mothers who are benefitting from AMITA Health's IOP care and treatment, we met with Clinical Director of the Perinatal IOP, Kimberly McCue, Ph.D., who introduced us to three mothers who share their stories and open encouragement for all mothers who are struggling to get the help and support they deserve.

A Conversation with Kimberly

How did you first hear about the Perinatal IOP at Alexian Brothers?

My outpatient therapist, Rebecca Christophersen, A.P.N., recommended that I come to the perinatal IOP.

Did you have reservations about group therapy?

I did, but I felt desperate; I felt like I really need to try something. I was so concerned about how I was getting worse instead of better.



How did the program address your specific needs?

After the first two weeks, the program and the staff helped me understand how severe my baseline anxiety had become. The program developed a treatment plan that included increased anxiety therapy...I spent more time focusing on my anxiety hierarchy and exposure therapy...more CBT homework.

What situation or symptoms brought you to the IOP?

I got to the point that I couldn't do things anymore...drive, go to the store...function the way I was used to. I was used to being a very high functioning, highly motivated person and I was consumed by anxiety and worry. I became incredibly worried that people would judge me and think

that "I went crazy after having my baby".

How has the program impacted your wellbeing and in turn, your family's health and wellness?

The program gave me the coping mechanisms and skills to rebuild my standards of grace and not focus so much on feelings of perfection. The program helped me identify and understand how to communicate better with my husband. This brought us closer together...I am better able to communicate my feelings with him and plan better for situations and manage emotions that come along with trying to balance life.

What does it mean to you that a program like AMITA's Perinatal IOP exists for pregnant and postpartum moms and their babies?

I wouldn't be here feeling so much gratitude if this program didn't exist. I wouldn't have the family that I do today. I wouldn't have been able to have a second child. I wouldn't have been able to experience joy in life in the way that I do now. I wouldn't be able to love my life the way I do now.

What is your message to the women (pregnant and postpartum) who might be reading this article...what would you want them to know?

You are not invincible. Your anxiety and depression does not define you and the person sitting next to you and across from you has those same feelings of imperfection, too! I now understand that there are seasons in life AND every season changes. This season, my words are "present", "grace", and "courage".

What does "Motherhood 2.0" mean to you?

I'm at a place of living in the moment. I am a good mom. I feel like I knew I was ready to discharge when I could talk about my journey...my fears...my worries...when I could mentally handle talking to others about my journey and not cry. When I could say the words, "I am in a program for perinatal anxiety and depression without crying"...when I was ready to tell others to help them.

Gwyn Shares Her Story

I was apprehensive about attending the Perinatal IOP—I had done group therapy before and had found it helpful at times—but I thought that I was so messed up and so far-gone that nothing would be able to help me. It took me over three months after Lita Simanis first told me about the program for



me to be willing to give the Perinatal IOP a try. I really didn't think that it would help—but I had reached a point where I was scared for my life, where I really thought that if the pain and hurt and thoughts didn't end, that I would end up taking my life before my daughter's next birthday (when she would turn two) and I didn't want her to grow up without a mom.

I had been in counseling since well before my daughter was born. I had a good psychiatrist. I had tried other IOP and PHP programs. But nothing helped—because I was missing the

perinatal piece. Nothing that I had been doing was focusing on the swarm of emotions that come after having a baby. But the Perinatal IOP was different. With the Perinatal IOP I was in a room full of women who had recently had a baby—we may have all been there for different specific reasons, but we were all experiencing the same struggles of parenthood together (the sleepless nights, the crying, the having no idea what you are doing) and being able to talk with the other moms and hear about their struggles helped me to feel so much less alone. They could understand and relate to how much harder everything was when you didn't have a full night of sleep. They could relate to the loss of identity I felt when I went from being a wife and teacher and friend, and all of these other things that made up my life before kids—to feeling like all I was was “mom” and I had no other parts of me left. The Perinatal IOP addressed those issues, while nothing I had been doing before I started the program really touched on them.

I was able to talk about my loss of identity and really be understood, not just by the other moms, but by the staff, too. We talked about loss of identity in groups and about ways to start taking pieces of our old identities back.

I had some major trauma that happened to me back in 2007 and I had thought that it was pretty well resolved—and then I had kids and it all came crashing back. Through the Perinatal IOP I learned how common it was for trauma to come back up like that for moms who were pregnant, through giving birth, or through having a new baby at home. I was able to start addressing that trauma again and was able to find a path forward that gave it even less control over my life than it had before I had kids.

Having a baby put me in this critical point in my life where I was so

vulnerable and scared yet so ready to make changes because I had these two beautiful girls that I was responsible for and I wanted to give them so much more than I was giving them at the time.

The Perinatal IOP has completely changed my life. I no longer feel like a failure as a parent, even on the hard days where everything seems to be going wrong, I now know that it's just a bad day and that I get to try again tomorrow. I'm happy and enjoying life. My anxiety is under control and I have tools to help me.

I have been able to break generational “sins” from my parents parenting, and from their parents, and their parents' parents. My children get to experience the best of me every day instead of the worst of me that they spent years seeing.

This program is seriously life-changing. And it doesn't just help fix perinatal issues, but it helps to correct the decades of poor coping skills that most of us have. I feel so lucky that there was a program like this so close to home, that allowed me to bring my baby, and that focused on the unique needs of new moms. If you have had a baby in the last two years and you often feel inadequate or overwhelmed by little things, PLEASE look into this program! I know that going to group therapy four days a week can feel intimidating and it takes a week or two to really start to feel comfortable with the other moms. But try it. You won't regret doing the program, but you may regret not doing the program.

In Her Words: Amy's Story

I learned about the Perinatal IOP program during my clinical intake at Alexian Brothers. When the woman who was doing my intake learned that I was pregnant and experiencing symptoms of antenatal (prenatal) depression, she called in Kim McCue to meet with me immediately to see if we thought the Perinatal IOP would be a good fit for me. I was incredibly anxious to be part of a mental health program for many reasons. The biggest reason for my reservations was what my family and friends would think of me for having to be in such a program.

Even though I have been going to therapy since college, I grew up in a strict Asian family where mental health was never discussed, crying, or displaying “negative” emotions was considered a sign of weakness, and I was never to show too much emotion if I were incredibly joyful.

I think my experience is a bit different than some other moms who have been in the program because I not only completed program



once, but twice. Having to enter back into program the second time felt like the biggest failure in my book at that time: “Did I not learn enough the first time? What did it mean that I had to go through the same program twice? How could I let it get to the point of needing to be in program AGAIN?” Hindsight is 20/20 and when I was in program the first time, I didn’t have our son yet and I could only listen to the stories of other moms. Being in program for the second time, I was experiencing firsthand what it meant to be a mother and to struggle. I am grateful for both experiences in program. Many of the practices were the same but how they were applied was vastly different the second time around. I hope that inspires other moms who are struggling to reach out for help. I wasn’t ready to accept my bipolar diagnosis at the completion of program the first time through, but after putting in the hard work and learning about how to manage my bipolar in a healthy way, I was finally ready to accept my diagnosis and take effective action moving forward. None of that would have occurred had I not gone into the program a second time and I would not be as stable as I am now.

There are many things that make the Perinatal IOP at Alexian Brothers unique, but the one thing that stands out is the multifaceted approach the clinicians take. It’s not just one modality of therapy—say CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy)—it is a combination of therapies, exercises, and methods that treat all the different pieces of trauma. The clinicians also include spouses, partners, and support people for each individual which is key in helping moms to heal. I am very fortunate to have an incredibly supportive husband and this program taught us so many invaluable skills that we still use to this day even though it’s been almost three years since I completed program.

When I was seven months pregnant with my now three-year-old son when I attempted to take my own life. It was Super Bowl Sunday in 2016 when my husband found me in our bedroom closet with a plastic bag over my head. He took the next day off of work to stay with me, make sure I was safe, and take me to see my therapist. It was then that my therapist recommended that I go to Alexian Brothers to be psychiatrically evaluated and begin the appropriate program. It brings tears to my eyes because it makes me realize how grateful I am that the Perinatal IOP program exists and because without it, I don’t know that I would have ever been able to see our son smile, roll over, crawl, walk, run, play, and do all the things he does that makes me so happy and proud to be his mom.


This program and its continued support have had a profound impact on my wellbeing. Being in program was a process of letting go of the expectations I had of myself for motherhood and becoming who I needed to be for me, my son, and my family. My family and I have reaped the rewards of the culmination of all the hard work I’ve put in over the past three years so we can live in the present moment without my fears and anxieties being in the driver’s seat and hijacking my every thought.

It’s hard to swallow your pride and admit that you need help. For me, it was the difference between life and death. That sounds dramatic but had Amita’s Perinatal IOP not existed back in February 2016, I am not sure if there would have been a program that would have addressed my needs as a soon-to-be new mother suffering from antenatal depression and undiagnosed bipolar.

Motherhood is the hardest job you’ll ever do and it’s ok to ask for support. There’s no shame in going to therapy or having to enter in a program like the Perinatal IOP. In my opinion, there’s no better program for your healing to take place in than AMITA’s Perinatal IOP.



Helping mothers and their families find the right treatment is AMITA Health's Perinatal Intensive Outpatient Team. In front, from left: Xiaohong Yu, M.D. (Psychiatry and Sleep Medicine), Cecelia, Psy.D. (Clinical IOP Director), Kimberly McCue, Ph.D., IOP Clinical Supervisor, and Echo, a therapy dog. Second row, from left: Rev. Dorothy Symonds (Program Chaplain), and Brenda Papierniak, Psy.D., LCPC, PMH-C (Perinatal Therapist). Third row, from left: Lita Simanis, MSW, LCSW, PMH-C (Coordinator, Pregnancy and Postpartum Mood & Anxiety Disorder Program), Suzie Hester, MA, LPC, Counselor for IOP, and Laura Spencer RNC, BSN (Perinatal Mental Health Nurse). Top row, from left: Grecia Bautista, MS (Bi-Lingual Counselor for Perinatal IOP) and Shannon Brown, RN, ASN (Perinatal Mental Health Nurse).

Motherhood 2.0 is about shedding the expectations of who I thought I was, and who I expected myself to be as a mother. It’s removing the barriers I had built up when the chains of mental illness had been binding me for so long. It’s about creating a life that’s not necessarily free of anxiety or dark times, but being able to live life as it is right now and knowing healthy ways to handle the anxieties and dark times when they arise. It’s about adapting when changes need to be made—and not feeling guilt or shame when reaching out for help. It’s seeing the sense of calm I worked so hard to create for myself reflected in my child, instead of the anxiety-riddled tendencies I was so desperately trying to avoid passing on to him. Without program, none of this would have been possible. 

Alexian Brothers Foundation is continually fundraising for the Perinatal IOP so that no mother is turned away due to financial situations. The Foundation is also looking for philanthropic partners to support the expansion and growth of the IOP Program. If you would like to help, visit: alexianfoundation15508.thankyou4caring.org/PPDWalk or call the foundation directly at 224-273-4104.