



MedStar Health

MEDSTAR GEORGETOWN  
UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL



## **A Focus on Maternal Mental Health at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital**



Welcoming a new baby into the world is a joyous experience for many; it can also be a time of challenge and struggle for mothers and their families. Mental health concerns can worsen overall health during pregnancy and significantly interfere with a woman's ability to care for herself and her family, putting the pregnancy itself at risk. Perinatal mental illness increases a woman's risk for a range of negative pregnancy outcomes that can include pre-term labor, low birthweight, and NICU hospitalizations.

Today, **maternal mental health conditions are the most common complication of pregnancy and childbirth**, with as many as one in five women experiencing a perinatal mood or anxiety disorder. Despite increasing awareness, about 75% of women who experience these disorders—during pregnancy or after—do not get the help they need.





Women living in poverty and women of color are more likely to experience perinatal mental illness and least likely to get the help they need due to barriers such as stigma, fear associated with seeking help, and lack of access to culturally appropriate mental health care. Perinatal women of color have double the rates of maternal mental health complications with 38% experiencing postpartum depression compared to 13 to 19% for all new mothers.

Tragically, recent studies show that deaths by self-harm–suicide and overdose–are the leading causes of death for women in the first year following pregnancy.

We can help these women avoid tragic consequences and provide more stability for the whole family. Maternal mental health conditions are **temporary and treatable** utilizing a combination of self-care, social support, psychotherapy, and, when necessary, medication. The U.S. has begun to see an increase in specialized perinatal mental health programs that keep moms and babies together during intensive outpatient or inpatient treatment recognizing that perinatal anxiety and depression affects parenting, attachment, child wellbeing, and development.

Awareness is growing both inside and outside of the medical field, yet today there are no intensive outpatient programs in our region that can respond to the unique needs of perinatal women with acute and severe psychiatric illness.

**MedStar Georgetown University Hospital is determined to change that.**





## **Visionary leadership to ensure healthy mothers and mothers-to-be**



Leading this effort is Aimee L. Danielson, PhD, the founding director of the Women’s Mental Health Program at MedStar Georgetown and a nationally recognized expert whose life’s work has been devoted to perinatal mental health care.

A hands-on clinical practitioner, tireless advocate, and enthusiastic educator, Dr. Danielson treats mothers who experience mental illness; advocates for transformative national and local policies; and educates colleagues, medical students, and the public about the mental health issues so many mothers face. Her multifaceted approach and community-based work have inspired a groundbreaking vision for the MedStar Center for Maternal Mental Health **that prioritizes an immediate expansion of clinical services through a perinatal intensive outpatient program.**

Dr. Danielson works hand in hand with Dr. Matthew Biel, Chief of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychology, and his innovative team at MedStar Georgetown. Both leaders recognize the imperative to involve family members in managing mental illness, especially when there are children in the family. By providing new mothers with mental illness better access to appropriate care facilities that promote mother-child bonding, we can support the healthy development of the child and the family.



# The right time to prioritize perinatal mental health



Demand for perinatal outpatient psychiatric care is at an all-time high in the Washington, D.C., region. An increase in mental health screenings in programs like the community and MedStar Health partnerships—Safe Babies Safe Moms—help identify patients in need of care, but there are not enough treatment programs to meet the need. Education and advocacy efforts have raised awareness, yet there are **insufficient resources to meet the demand**.

Dr. Danielson's leadership is the cornerstone of expanded services for perinatal mental health care. With exceptional clinicians and programs in psychiatry as well as obstetrics and gynecology at MedStar Georgetown, plus successful community and hospital partnerships like Safe Babies Safe Moms, the foundation of expertise is in place to build a new model of care that includes a full continuum of treatment options with varying levels of intensity and support for mothers experiencing a perinatal mood or anxiety disorder.



**After Janet's baby was born, she experienced low mood and intense feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and hopelessness.**

**With a history of bipolar disorder, Janet required more intensive care than she could typically receive on an outpatient basis. She was breastfeeding, taking care of two other children, and bonding with her newborn, so a hospital stay was not feasible.**

**Fortunately, Dr. Danielson's team was able to provide therapy three times a week, regular family meetings, weekly medication management, education about her condition. Their work with Janet demonstrated the benefits of this resource-heavy approach. A calmer setting and more organized process would have helped Janet even more. Her experience helped Dr. Danielson's team to envision just how an intensive outpatient program would complete the continuum of care and support the mental health of families like Janet's.**



## Intensive outpatient program for perinatal mental health care

Currently, many mothers with perinatal mood or anxiety disorders are treated successfully with weekly mental health appointments, while the most severe cases often require inpatient psychiatric care. But a critical gap in the continuum of care exists for perinatal patients requiring more intensive mental health care who do not need inpatient psychiatric care or who wish to avoid the disruption, trauma, and separation from their newborn necessitated by a hospital stay.

The new perinatal intensive outpatient program will be a best-in-class program, launching in 2023, modeled after the most successful programs in the country and customized for our region. Pregnant and postpartum women who are in the moderate to high-risk range of depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders will receive comprehensive care focused on supporting the mother-baby relationship, including individual and group therapies, medication, educational support and mindfulness meditation, as well as classes on parenting, attachment and child development.





**Mother and baby are in treatment together**, continuing the special bonding process that is critical to healthy attachment and child development. The family–baby, partners and/or support persons–are integrated into the holistic care provided by experts in maternal and family mental health. Mothers will continue to live at home with their families, applying their new skills and improving the home environment.

The program will also be a setting for new and innovative research and will enable a vital expansion of the educational opportunities in perinatal mental health for residents and trainees in psychiatry, psychology, and social work.

**The program will transform mental health care and outcomes for pregnant and postpartum patients in the region.**



**Philanthropic partnerships  
will bring the vision to life**



## As this ambitious effort moves forward, partnerships will be essential to fully support the perinatal intensive outpatient program.

We have a **unique opportunity to pull together extraordinary expertise** across MedStar Georgetown to build a perinatal intensive outpatient program that meets expectant and new mothers where they are and provides personalized support to turn their struggles into healthy pregnancies and successful transitions to motherhood.

Mothers with perinatal mental health issues are our sisters, our daughters, our nieces, our friends, and our neighbors. Through our collective commitment, we can **provide solutions** that will prioritize the health and wellbeing of mothers so they can care for their babies and create loving, stable, and healthy families in our communities.



**“I’ve personally observed the far-reaching negative impacts of psychiatric illness on mothers’ own physical health, intimate relationships, attachment to and connection with their babies, as well as parenting behaviors and attitudes towards their children. I have also witnessed the transformation that follows successful treatment. We no longer wonder about whether treatment works. We know it works. Women can and do get better with treatment and in turn their families get healthier and stronger. Our mission is to create and improve access to the kinds of treatment mothers need.”**

**Dr. Aimee Danielson**

# We invite you to partner with us to transform our community and beyond.

For more information, please contact **Wendy Heistad Carter, director of philanthropy, MedStar Georgetown University Hospital**, at **202-340-4559** or via email at [wendy.h.carter@medstar.net](mailto:wendy.h.carter@medstar.net).

**It's  
how  
we  
treat  
people.**

MedStar Health  
Office of Philanthropy  
10980 Grantchester Way, 7th Floor  
Columbia, MD 21044



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