



Lisa Cumming Photography

# Postpartum Support

## A Community for all Mothers

By Harmony Hunter

“You don’t have to pretend it’s easy.” That’s what Licensed Professional Counselor Danielle Cauley tells the new mothers who come through her doors at Canary Counseling in Williamsburg. “We want to project this persona and this image that we have it together and we’re perfect moms and it’s easy. It’s not. It’s really not.”

Reaching out to new mothers in the Wil-

liamsburg area is Danielle’s specialty and her passion. It’s also a drive that’s deeply personal. After the birth of her daughter in 2016, she found herself experiencing the emotions that at least one in four new moms face: anxiety, isolation, disconnection and depression.

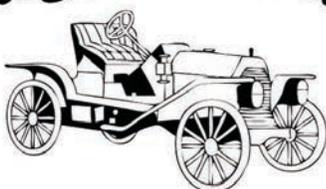
It’s a group of symptoms known clinically as Postpartum Mood and Anxiety Disorders, but for Danielle, it was simply the first time

she’d ever experienced anything other than being extremely high-functioning. “I felt crazy, and I was a therapist. I couldn’t imagine what other moms who weren’t trained in this were going through,” Danielle says.

Postpartum Mood and Anxiety Disorders are separate issues from Postpartum Psychosis, a rare condition in which mothers may have urges to harm themselves or their babies. Of-

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ten the two are confused, leading to a tremendous negative stigma and a resulting hesitancy to seek support in the postpartum period.

“Mothers say, ‘I love my baby. I wouldn’t go to a postpartum support group because I’m not quite that bad,’” Danielle says. But the term “postpartum” simply describes the period of weeks and months after a mother gives birth.

Other new moms might be told that their whirlpool of feelings can be attributed to what’s colloquially called the “Baby Blues,” but that set of symptoms compose a relatively short window of time in the postpartum period. Danielle tells her patients, “The ‘Baby Blues’ are actually only two weeks. Scientifically, that’s when your hormone spike happens after the baby comes out, milk comes in and then hormones are relatively regulated.”

Resources and support for what Danielle was experiencing were frustratingly scarce in Williamsburg, but she found healing and happiness again in her new role as mother by embarking on what’s called the “Path to Wellness,” a four-step approach that includes social support, medication, talk therapy and

self-care.

“I didn’t see an actual therapist or get on medication at the time, but I did the other two. I used the Breastfeeding Support Group as my postpartum support group. When I started to realize that I wasn’t alone and other moms were feeling that way, then I was able to get better. It wasn’t until then that I was connected with Postpartum Support Virginia,” Danielle says.

Postpartum Support Virginia would become intrinsically connected to Danielle’s personal and professional life. The state chapter of the national Postpartum Support International, Postpartum Support Virginia, exists to increase awareness among public and professional communities about the emotional changes that women experience during pregnancy and postpartum. Today, she is Williamsburg’s Postpartum Support Virginia Coordinator.

Navigating her own adjustment to parenthood and searching out the people and processes that would help her feel better left her with a desire to make sure that every new mother in town would have a peer to reach out

to in the overwhelming tide of joy, exhaustion and disorientation that is motherhood.

“I discovered I wanted to start working with moms. I wanted to start being that support and getting out there. The big push with the outreach is trying to get moms screened early. The earlier we catch it, the better prognosis for healing. The earlier they can enjoy being a mom, enjoy their babies,” she says.

Screening is simple. “Our drive and Postpartum Support Virginia’s tagline is to ask a mom, ‘How are you really doing?’ We encourage everyone: doctors, families, pediatricians, friends. Opening a space for moms to share. With that, being able to be okay with the idea that not all moms are going to be happy and joyful and loving and ecstatic every single moment. It’s not supposed to be like that. That’s not how motherhood is, ever. There are always ups and downs.”

When a mom is given the opportunity to say that she still isn’t feeling like herself, sleep deprivation notwithstanding, then she can begin the process of feeling better. Sometimes an anxiety issue flares up and might need to be managed for a time. Other mothers find com-

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fort in commiserating about both the trials and the joys of the transition to motherhood. Wherever a mother falls in her postpartum timeframe, Danielle and Postpartum Support Virginia can help surround her with support.

Just knowing that other women are working, sometimes struggling, through the same experience is tremendously powerful. Danielle tells her patients, “Postpartum anxiety and depression strips a woman of joy when she is supposed to feel it the most. I know there are nights when the mere thought of the sun going down creates anxiety about another sleepless night. I know you feel the pressure to get out, make plans and be presentable and happy when others come over. I know leaving your baby is hard, but I also know that being with them all day seems endless. I know scary thoughts come in that you are afraid to tell others. I feel your guilt, irritation, anger and frustration.”

It is possible, and even simple, to begin to get better? Danielle is determined that no new mother in Williamsburg will experience the struggle, guilt and isolation that she felt with-

out a community of supportive moms. For her, the cornerstone of the cure is outreach, beginning at the doctor’s office.

“Our goal with Postpartum Support Virginia and across the country is to get moms screened within the first year. So screenings should take place during pregnancy, during a mom’s six-week checkup and during those appointments with the pediatrician. That’s the vision that I have, that moms are getting support at the hospital, are getting a brief education at the hospital and then continual screening throughout.”

Danielle Cauley envisions a future for Williamsburg that includes interacting with new moms and families from the moment the baby arrives. For her, counteracting some of the idealized expectations of life with a newborn can be the first step in helping women find their balance in parenthood.

“Ideally, I would love to have a therapist or a counselor who goes to the hospital when moms deliver to say, ‘Congratulations on your new baby. This time will be filled with so many ups and downs. My job is not to take

away from the joy, but to let you know that it gets hard and it’s okay that it gets hard. You’ll get better, and there’s support and people love you and if you feel like this transition and this time is not what you expected, reach out. Here’s my card. Let me know.”

Support isn’t just for moms experiencing anxiety or depression. “Whether you are trying to conceive, caring for a newborn and struggling to adjust to the transition to motherhood, or you are a veteran mom of three kids and you feel like you can’t keep it all together, there are safe places to come together to talk about that with other moms and Postpartum Support Virginia facilitators,” she says. NDN

*Postpartum Support Virginia and its circle of fellow mothers meet at their weekly motherhood support groups at Sentara Hospital and at the Childhood Development Resources Center. More information can be found at [www.postpartumva.org](http://www.postpartumva.org), and Danielle’s social outreach on Facebook at Postpartum Support Williamsburg. Danielle can be found at [www.canarycounselingva.com](http://www.canarycounselingva.com).*

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## A Debt of Gratitude

CDR owes a debt of gratitude to many who have served our agency over the years — but no one is more deserving of our thanks than Deputy Director Lisa Thomas. Retiring after 30 years, Lisa has overseen direct services to thousands of children and their families.

“Over those years, I have worked with an impressive array of professionals across many disciplines and engaged with community partners and elected officials. But most importantly, I have met scores of parents and children who have touched my heart and will forever shape my understanding of resilience and strength,” said Lisa.

On behalf of the CDR staff, volunteers, and the families we serve, we wish Lisa the best in her retirement and celebrate her many contributions to our community.

