

Brought to you by  × 

The Hidden Crisis of

Motherless Mothers

Making the Invisible Visible in Maternal Health and Policy

Contents

Foreword By The Motherless Mothers & Peanut | *p.02*

00 Executive Summary | *p.04*

01 Introduction | *p.08*

02 The Prevalence of Mother Loss | *p.09*

03 Emotional & Mental Health Impacts | *p.11*

04 Parenting & Identity | *p.14*

05 Gaps in Services & Support | *p.16*

06 Comparative Findings | *p.19*

07 Future Planning & Family Decisions | *p.21*

08 Awareness & Advocacy | *p.23*

09 Recommendations | *p.25*

Foreword

By The Motherless Mothers & Peanut

Every mother deserves a village. But for one in three, the person who should be at the center of it, her mom, is gone.

This research exposes what's long been ignored in maternal health: the fact that grief doesn't end with birth, it deepens. Too many mothers are left isolated and misdiagnosed by a system that never asks the simplest question: "Do you have maternal support?"

"Being a mother without my own mum feels like walking barefoot on broken glass."

- Nira | UK

The figures are stark. Motherless mothers are more likely to experience postnatal depression, anxiety, and profound isolation. 85% say motherhood reopened their grief. 74% say a healthcare professional never even asked about maternal support.

But the solution is within reach: **maternal care must be grief-aware**. One simple question—"Do you have support from your mother or a maternal figure?"—combined with better training, peer support, and tailored resources, could transform outcomes.

This report is both evidence and a call to action. It is time to recognize and respond to the hidden crisis of motherless mothers. No woman should feel invisible in her motherhood journey.

“When I became a mum, I thought I could outlove the grief, that if I poured everything into my baby, I wouldn’t feel the ache of doing it without my own mum. But the truth is, grief doesn’t fade when new life begins; it grows. It sits beside the joy. This campaign exists because no woman should have to mother in silence. We’re finally recognising the invisible struggles of mothering after loss.”

– Louise Kirby-Jones | Co-founder, The Motherless Mothers

00. Executive Summary

Motherless mothers face extreme mental health risks.

71% Report anxiety.

67% Report depression.

4X Overall, perinatal mental health conditions (anxiety or depression) affect **81%**: that's over **4 times** the US population average^[1] and **3 times** the UK average.

5.4X **Postnatal depression (PND) risk is significantly elevated.** Motherless mothers are **5.4 times** more likely to report experiencing PND than US population estimates^[2] and **3.4 times** the UK average.

Motherhood revives painful emotions.

85% motherless mothers say motherhood **reopened** their grief.

¹ Tanya Khemet Taiwo et al. (2024). *Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorder and Reproductive Justice: Examining Unmet Needs for Mental Health and Social Services in a National Cohort*.

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024). Selected 2016–2022 Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Indicators.

Isolation is pervasive and persistent.

95%

reported feeling isolated or unsupported in the past 12 months.

Healthcare professionals are not asking the most basic question.

74%

of motherless mothers say a clinician **never asked** if they had maternal support.

54%

among those few who were asked, only half were offered relevant support.

Identity and confidence are deeply affected

79%

say their mother's absence changed their identity as a mother.

67%

say it reduced their parenting confidence.

1 IN 3

new moms is motherless (global: **32%**; **27%** UK; **36%** US).

80%

felt isolated and unsupported due to maternal absence.

68%

had their grief **misunderstood/dismissed** as other causes, such as PND.

82%

say clinicians should **routinely ask** about maternal support

76%

want **grief-aware training** for all healthcare professionals

Call to action

Maternal care must be grief-aware. Every perinatal pathway should:

1. **Routinely ask** about maternal presence/absence.

2. Provide **grief-aware training** for staff.

3. Resource **peer, counselling, and community support** for motherless mothers.

About **Peanut**

Peanut is the first online community to connect women throughout all stages of motherhood. Whether you're navigating menopause, motherhood, pregnancy, or trying to conceive, the app provides access to a community that is there to listen, share information, and offer valuable advice. With accolades including Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies 2023, TIME100's Most Influential Companies of 2022 and Apple's Trend of the Year 2021, Peanut has become modern motherhood's digital village. For more about Peanut's community, please visit: www.peanut-app.io.

About **The Motherless Mothers (TMM)**

The Motherless Mothers (TMM) is a community and charity founded by Louise Kirby-Jones and Adina Belloli, who connected in June 2024 while navigating the challenges of motherhood without the support of their own mothers. What started as a conversation became a movement to ensure that motherless mothers feel seen, supported, and represented. Today, TMM advocates for grief-aware maternal care while providing a safe community where motherless mothers can find understanding, connection, and hope. For more about TMM, please visit: www.themotherlessmothers.com.

01. Introduction

Motherhood is a time when most women hope to be supported, guided, and nurtured. For many, their own mothers are a central part of that journey. But for millions of women worldwide, that support is missing. Whether through bereavement, estrangement, illness, or distance, they become mothers without their own mother by their side.

Until now, the scale of this experience has remained a mystery. There has been no widespread data on how many women are motherless mothers, and very little research has been conducted on the unique challenges they face.* Without evidence, advocacy has been difficult. Without numbers, the silence has continued.

This is the first large-scale study of motherless motherhood. It combines hard data with real voices to make visible what has too long been overlooked. **The findings are stark: nearly one in three new mothers is motherless**, yet the healthcare system rarely even asks about maternal support. The result is a hidden crisis, one with profound consequences for mental health, identity, and confidence in motherhood.

The voices of motherless mothers are clear and consistent: **grief doesn't disappear when the baby arrives; it intensifies**. The absence of a mother shapes emotional well-being, heightens the risk of anxiety and depression, and leaves women more vulnerable to isolation at

precisely the moment they should be most supported.

This is not only a matter of individual pain, it is a systemic failure. By failing to ask one simple question—*“Do you have support from your mother or a maternal figure?”*—healthcare services miss a crucial determinant of maternal wellbeing.

The motivation for this research is twofold: to quantify the scale of the issue for the first time, and to advocate for change in how maternal care is delivered. The solutions are simple and achievable: routine screening, grief-aware training, and investment in peer and community support. But they depend on one thing: society recognising that mother loss in motherhood matters.

This report is both evidence and a call to action. It asks policymakers, healthcare professionals, and society at large to see motherless mothers, to listen, and to respond, because no woman should have to struggle in silence.

* American author Hope Edelman's 2007 book titled *Motherless Mothers* is one rare piece of work which has explored the issue, identifying 8 common themes amongst the women in her study.

02. The Prevalence of Mother Loss

How common is motherless motherhood? Far more than most people realize.

Our research shows that one in three mothers globally (36% in the US, 27% in the UK) are navigating motherhood without the presence or support of their own mother. These are not marginal figures—they represent millions of women raising children without the guidance, reassurance, and practical help of a maternal figure.

Mother loss occurs in different ways across various stages of life. For some, the absence is caused by bereavement, the death of a mother during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. For others, it stems from estrangement, neglect, or the impact of addiction. Some mothers lose maternal support to illness, such as dementia or chronic conditions, which gradually erode their relationship or capacity for support. Others are separated from their mothers by geographical distance, often with no alternative source of support nearby.

The timing of this loss profoundly shapes the

experience of motherhood. Women who lost their mothers in childhood describe entering parenthood without any reference point for what a supportive maternal relationship looks like. Those who were bereaved or estranged speak of the sharp reopening of grief as pregnancy and early motherhood unfold. And for women whose mothers are alive but absent due to illness or distance, the pain can be particularly complex—grieving someone who exists but cannot provide the support so deeply needed.

What is clear across these stories is that the absence of a mother is not a temporary gap; in many cases, it is a lifelong reality that resurfaces with new intensity at the threshold of motherhood.

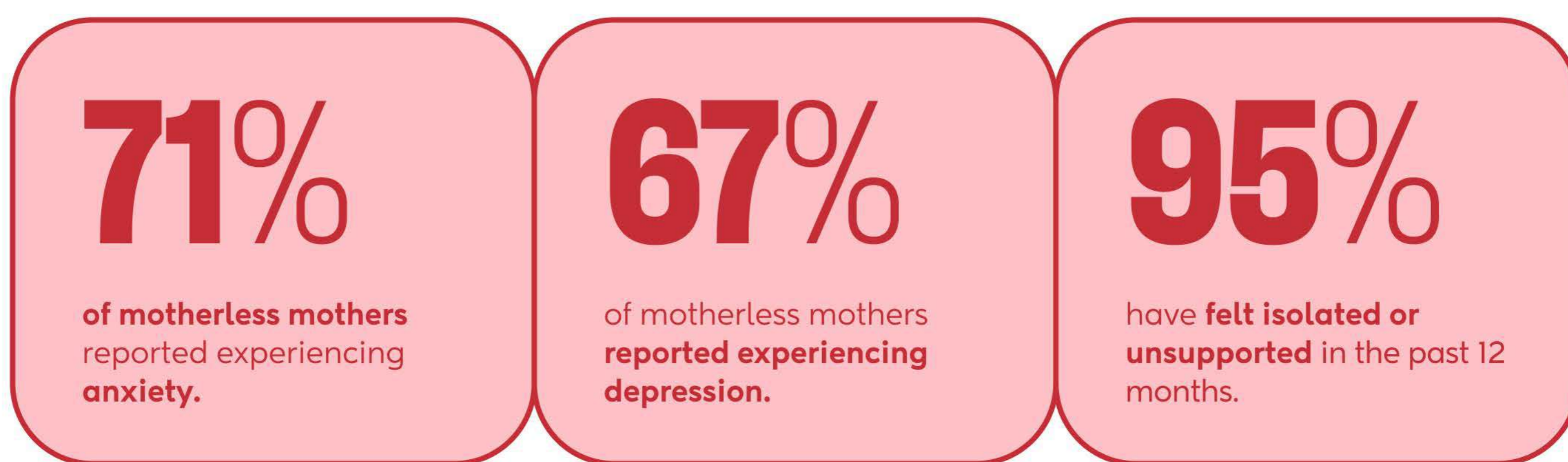
We have shown that mother loss in motherhood is not rare, and it is not abstract. It is a widespread experience, one that remains almost entirely invisible in maternal healthcare systems. By making the prevalence clear, this research lays the foundation for a conversation and, in turn, a transformation that is urgently overdue.



**Causes
of maternal
absence**

03. Emotional & Mental Health Impacts

Motherhood is already a time of enormous psychological adjustment. For motherless mothers, the absence of maternal support makes this period especially challenging, amplifying feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression.



There is a systemic gap in care, and the solutions are simple.

Motherhood as a Grief Trigger

Far from being left in the past, grief resurfaces powerfully during pregnancy and early motherhood. **85% of motherless mothers said these stages "reopened" their grief**, often in sudden and overwhelming ways. Everyday milestones such as the 12-week scan, giving birth, or facing the first sleepless nights become stark reminders of absence. For many, the longing for their mother is intertwined with the exhaustion and emotional strain of new parenthood.

"Having my own babies, I longed for what it seemed other young mums had: a babysitter that was 100% trusted, a knitter, someone who was proud of me and adored my children, someone whose advice I could rely on and whose shoulder I could cry on. I longed for the unconditional love that I was giving to my children. I often felt resentful and have always been haunted by the loss of my mother.

- Mary | UK

“Having children without my mom around adds a new layer of grief. There’s no quick phone call to ask advice or talk about the joys and hardships of parenting. I try to always speak about her to my kids, but missing a grandma in our life is heartbreaking.”

– Meghan | USA

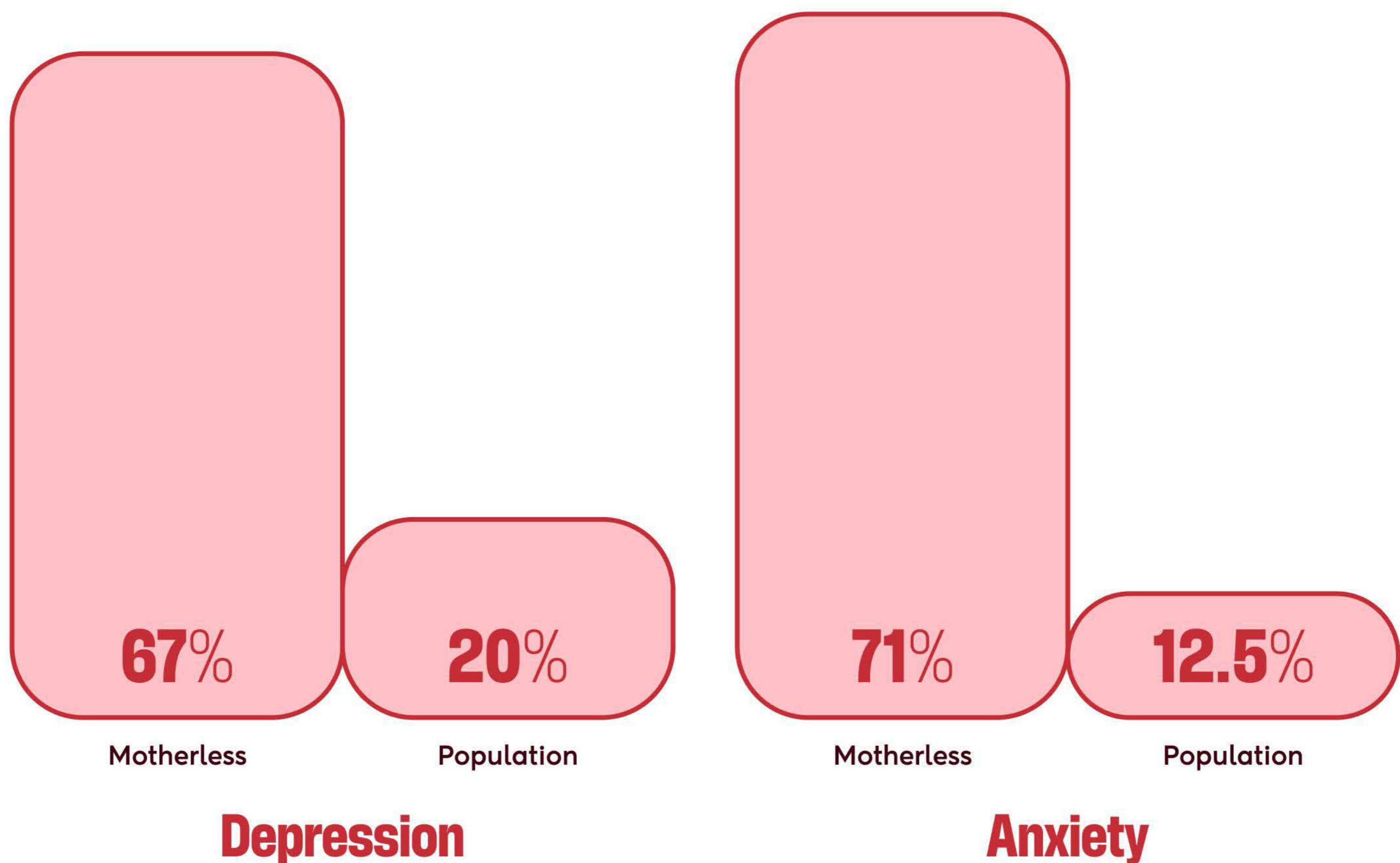
Why this matters for maternal health

The absence of maternal support is not only a private grief; it is a risk factor for perinatal mental health conditions like postnatal depression (PND) and postnatal anxiety (PNA). When left unrecognised, these conditions can affect not only mothers but also child development, bonding, and family wellbeing.

“I second-guessed everything. I realized how much I valued reassurance from her. Mothers are our first sources of comfort, and sometimes things can feel scary without them. I have postpartum anxiety, and I know that having her support would’ve made a huge difference.”

– Rachel[†] | Canada

The stacked disadvantages of being motherless in motherhood.



“The wound of losing one’s mother remains, and it often reopens when a woman becomes a mother herself. The absence of her mother’s voice, her smell, her holding arms and loving gaze can be felt all over again as she holds her own baby. Grief and love sit side by side in these moments.

When maternal connections are ruptured, whether through death or emotional loss, a mother may struggle to bear both her own grief and the dependency of her baby. Without adequate support, the mother can feel unbearably alone with the weight of loss and the baby’s needs.

For these mothers, emotional support is not an optional extra, it is essential to their mental health and to the baby’s sense of safety. Let us build communities of concern that can hold the grieving mother so that she, in turn, can hold her baby.”

*– Dr. Jeanne Magagna, Child, Adult & Family
Psychotherapist; Former Head of Psychotherapy Services,
Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children*

04. Parenting & Identity

Motherhood proposes a profound identity shift. For motherless mothers, this transition is further complicated by absence. The data shows the deep ripple effect of mother loss on both identity and confidence in parenting.

79%

said their mother's absence **directly changed their sense of identity as a mother.**

67%

reported reduced confidence in their parenting as a result of the loss.

Everyday gaps, no one to ask for advice, no childcare backup, and no emotional reassurance in moments of crisis were **repeatedly cited as compounding stressors.**

The absence is both structural and emotional. Motherless mothers often lack the fallback safety net that many peers rely on. From navigating feeding challenges and making medical decisions, to finding childcare cover in emergencies, they do so without the intergenerational support that most mothers describe as "essential".

Identity disrupted

Mother loss not only removes practical support but also reshapes how women see themselves as mothers. Without a maternal role model, many describe feeling untethered or unsure of what "good mothering" should look like. Others share how their identity is shaped by absence: overcompensating to "be everything" for their child or struggling with feelings of inadequacy.

"My mum died at 54 from cancer and was an alcoholic. I had my two daughters later, but the grief came in new waves – even more intense because I didn't have my mum's supportive presence and love when I felt so vulnerable, trying to navigate this new role of motherhood without her to guide me. I don't think I've ever felt as alone or isolated as I did that first night bringing my newborn daughter home – exhausted, tearful, and struggling to get the hang of breastfeeding. I wanted so desperately to be cared for the way my friends' mothers cared for them, for her to hold my hand and tell me everything was going to be okay."

– Siobhan | UK

"Losing my mum was the first time I experienced a loss of identity. The second was becoming a mum – all those feelings came rushing back tenfold. It's a long journey, but I've chosen to see it as a blank canvas, a chance to redefine who I am."

– Amy | UK

"We are only now beginning to understand the magnitude of what it means to transition into motherhood and the identity shifts that come with it.

But, for motherless mothers, this transition is layered with complexity. As we navigate the demands of motherhood, we are also grappling with grief. We have a portal to the past where we can revisit and revise parts of our narrative. We're raising children while still, in some ways, feeling like children ourselves. We become and embody the person we've lost. This dual experience of parenting while grieving is rarely talked about."

– Adina Belloli | *Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist and Co-founder, The Motherless Mothers*

05. Gaps in Services & Support

The question that isn't asked

For many motherless mothers, the healthcare system fails at the very first step: asking.

74%

said a healthcare professional had **never once asked** about the presence or absence of maternal support during pregnancy or early motherhood.

54%

Among the minority who were asked, only **54%** received relevant support.

This silence not only leaves women isolated but also fuels misdiagnosis, with grief dismissed as postnatal depression or anxiety.

"I think there was only one moment during my pregnancy and postpartum where becoming a motherless mother came up... during my first antenatal appointment when we were discussing family history, and I disclosed my mum's terminal cancer a few years prior, and it was noted down, but nothing else! In hindsight, it would have been amazing for the midwife to acknowledge it and discuss how it might impact my journey."

– Zoe | UK

"Current services feel inadequate. The only enquiries made during my pregnancy were about partner support, even when I mentioned that my mum was no longer around. Between that and postnatal health visitor services being drastically reduced in my area, I felt alone in my grief. As for the claims about the 6-week postpartum check being solely focused on me, if only! With my first baby, it never happened. With my second baby, the doctor quickly rushed his checks on my daughter, asked if I was ok and ushered us out!

– Siobhán | UK

"I remember being given anti-depressants and some muscle relaxants to help me sleep, as they said I was depressed 3 months after my mum had died... Turns out it was grief, and I needed help, support, and kindness, not medicines and a diagnosis."

– Catherine⁺ | USA

What was accessed vs what was needed

When motherless mothers did reach for help, they mostly found it through self-navigation:

Accessed:

General counseling or therapy, online resources, peer groups.

Wanted but missing:

Grief-aware antenatal classes, peer/buddy schemes, specialist counseling services.

This gap forces women to patch together support too late, too little, and at greater cost.

Defining grief-aware care

Grief-aware care means recognizing maternal loss as a key social determinant of health. It is not an optional extra, it's fundamental. It requires:

Screening:

Routinely asking about maternal support at early pregnancy appointments and throughout perinatal care.

Compassionate communication:

Training professionals to engage with loss without stigma or avoidance.

Referral pathways:

Clear routes to peer support, bereavement services, and targeted therapy.

“The loss of a mother doesn't disappear with time; in fact, it often resurfaces powerfully during pregnancy, birth, and the early weeks of parenting, when women are most vulnerable. Yet our healthcare systems rarely ask the questions that could uncover this silent risk. There's no routine screening, no dedicated pathways, and little understanding of how deeply mother loss can impact mental health, bonding, and identity in motherhood. I didn't realise how profoundly my own grief would shape my experience until I was already struggling. With just small, thoughtful changes, like asking the right questions early on and creating space for these conversations, we can prevent women from falling through the cracks. It's time our systems recognised and responded to the emotional realities of motherless mothers, with grief-aware care.”

- Stephanie Blamires | *Specialist Antenatal and Newborn Screening Midwife, and Motherless Mother*

06. Comparative Findings

Mental Health

The research shows a stark divide. Motherless mothers report significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to supported mothers and are.

4X

Overall, perinatal mental health conditions (anxiety or depression) affect **81%**: that's over **4 times** the US population average and **3 times** the UK average.^[3]

5.4X

Postnatal depression (PND) risk is significantly elevated. Motherless mothers are **5.4 times** more likely to report experiencing PND than US population estimates and **3.4 times** the UK average.^[4]

"Even when surrounded by people, the absence of my mom made me feel like I had no one I could truly lean on."

- Antoinette[†] | USA

³ Department of Health and Social Care (2025) *Estimated prevalence of perinatal mental health conditions in England: 2016 to 2019*.

⁴ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2025) *Postnatal depression harming up to 85,000 new mums in England - warns RCPsych*. Available www.rcpsych.ac.uk

Wellbeing

When asked to describe their overall emotional wellbeing in pregnancy and early motherhood, **motherless mothers consistently reported worse mental health.** They were more likely to use descriptors such as “isolated”, “unsupported”, or “struggling”, while supported mothers were more likely to report feeling “supported” or “resilient”.

Crisis & practical support

Beyond mental health, the absence of a mother manifests in the practical realities of raising a child. Compared with supported mothers, motherless mothers reported:

Less access to reliable childcare backup in times of need.

Fewer sources of advice or reassurance for everyday parenting questions.

Greater vulnerability in emergencies, with fewer people to call on.

This gap in practical as well as emotional support compounds risk for isolation, burnout, and poor mental health.

“Mother loss as a new mom feels like a series of questions that will never be answered. I wish I could ask my mom what it felt like for her, how she coped. I hold tightly to nostalgia and tradition - it’s how I keep her present.”

– Coriann | USA

07. Future Planning & Family Decisions

Mother loss doesn't only affect the early days of parenting; it can **shape life choices long before conception**. For many women, the absence of a mother is a defining factor in when, how, and whether they choose to have children.

Timing & fertility

Some respondents described delaying motherhood, worried about how they would cope without maternal support during pregnancy and early parenthood. For some, these delays contributed to needing fertility treatment later on.

Others, however, brought their plans forward and built their families sooner. A common theme was the fear of "missing out" on an intergenerational bond – wanting children to know their grandmother before her health declined or feeling acutely aware of life's fragility after a maternal death.

Decisions on family size

Motherless mothers also spoke of how their grief shaped choices around family size. Some sought to build larger families as a way of recreating a sense of community and belonging. Others limited their family plans, feeling stretched too thin without maternal backup.

"After our 20-week scan, we called my mum to tell her we were having a girl. Just three weeks earlier, she had been diagnosed with a glioblastoma – a grade four brain tumor – but she still jumped up and down shouting 'yes!' with the biggest, most radiant smile. Mum held on long enough to meet her second granddaughter, my first child, but by then she could no longer walk, talk, or smile. It was such a different experience from the one I had always imagined. My daughter was only three months old, and now I struggle even to think about expanding our family – I can't imagine being pregnant and my mum not knowing."

– Jaimie | *Canada*

“I definitely delayed having children, even though I was in a loving relationship, financially stable, and had my own home. The fear and worry of not having my mum to support me through pregnancy and motherhood weighed heavily on me. And even now, with my baby at nine months old, I still feel that deep yearning for maternal support – and an ongoing sense of loss.”

– Kate[†] | USA

Perceptions of risk

Motherless mothers often reported heightened awareness of mortality and health risks. The experience of losing their own mothers at a young age translated into anxieties about leaving their own children behind, accelerating or complicating family planning decisions.

“I lost my Mum very suddenly when I was 30 years old. One day she was here, the next day she was gone. Fast forward a few years, and I fell pregnant at 37 and had my beautiful little girl at 38, towards the end of the Covid pandemic. Grief hit me all over again like a ton of bricks. I was a new Mum without my own Mum around to guide and reassure me. No one else seemed to understand me or know what I needed the way she would have. I became resentful and jealous of all the other new Mums who had their Mums around to help and support them. I was very precious about my daughter and found it incredibly difficult to let others hold her, including my lovely Dad, who was over the moon to become a Grandad. Even now, 3 years on, I rarely leave my daughter’s side as I worry that I could be gone suddenly, just like my Mum.”

– Helen | UK

08. Awareness & Advocacy

Despite the scale and impact of mother loss, it remains largely invisible in maternal healthcare and wider society.

Misunderstood grief

Nearly **seven in ten (68%)** motherless mothers said that their grief was misunderstood or dismissed by professionals. Too often, their complex emotional needs were mislabelled – for example, written off as postnatal depression without acknowledgement of the underlying grief.

"I felt overwhelming fear and guilt... I confided in my OBGYN about my pain and was diagnosed with PND/PPA, but really, I think I just needed my mom. Having her support would've made a huge difference."

– Luisa[†] | USA

The missing piece **in the "village"**

Almost all respondents (**96%**) agreed that a mother is a vital part of a mother's village. Yet **one in three women** navigate motherhood without one – an absence that reshapes not just their mental health, but also their day-to-day parenting support and sense of belonging.

"Mother loss for me is like looking at everyone else and not quite being able to put your finger on why you can't be like them, and then you remember, it's because they have the love and support of their mom in their world, and I don't. They say it takes a village to raise a baby, but where is my village without my mum? It's as if absolutely everything and nothing changed in an instant."

– Polly | UK

"Our invisibility does not stem from a lack of significance, but from society's discomfort with confronting the truth: motherhood is not meant to be a solitary endeavor. To acknowledge motherless mothers is to face uncomfortable truths about loss, caregiving, and the myths that idealize motherhood. These truths challenge the very foundation of how we view parenting, revealing the loneliness and isolation that many mothers experience."

– Adina Belloli | *Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist and Co-founder, The Motherless Mothers*

09. Recommendations

This research has made one thing clear: **mother loss is invisible in maternal healthcare, and it cannot remain so.** The solutions are simple, achievable, and urgently needed.

Ask the Question

Introduce a standard question at all perinatal appointments: **“Do you have practical and emotional support from your mother or a maternal figure?”** This single question ensures that motherless mothers are identified early and given the chance to access appropriate support.

Train with Empathy

Roll out short, mandatory training for OB-GYNs, midwives, health visitors, doctors, and maternity staff. Training should focus on:

Recognizing grief as a determinant of maternal health.

Responding with empathy and appropriate signposting.

Avoiding misdiagnosis (e.g., distinguishing grief from PND/PPA).

Fund Support Networks

Commission and expand services that address this overlooked need, from organizations such as The Motherless Mothers, including grief-aware antenatal groups, peer/buddy schemes for motherless mothers, clear counseling and mental health referral pathways and crisis and emergency support options.

Call to Action

It's time for maternal care to become **grief-aware**.

Asking just one question – *“Do you have maternal support?”* – could change the trajectory of care for millions of women.

Grief-aware care is about understanding, early support, and human connection. We know resources are stretched, but small systemic shifts, better screening, more awareness, clearer pathways, could change everything for motherless mothers.

What we're really saying is: recognize that grief is part of her story, part of her risk, and part of her resilience. This isn't a new referral form or a complex redesign; it's a compassionate question, a simple handout, a follow-up, a different kind of listening.

For some women, that could be the moment they finally feel seen. Let's not miss it.



¹ Tanya Khemet Taiwo et al. (2024). Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorder and Reproductive Justice: Examining Unmet Needs for Mental Health and Social Services in a National Cohort.

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024). Selected 2016–2022 Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Indicators.

³ Department of Health and Social Care (2025) Estimated prevalence of perinatal mental health conditions in England: 2016 to 2019.

⁴ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2025) Postnatal depression harming up to 85,000 new mums in England - warns RCPsych. Available www.rcpsych.ac.uk

† Anonymized at respondents request.

Brought to you by

