

Grace Heathcote holding baby Edan, 3 months, in a front pack, twins Callum and Kieran, 3, and dad Gary.



Oh boy, oh boy

Giving birth to twins is no laughing matter. Nor is the exhaustion, stress and anxiety which can so cruelly replace the euphoria of delivering two or more babies. For those in need of moral support, there are no better friends than fellow multi-mums

WORDS GRACE HEATHCOTE

Every Thursday morning, on the eastern outskirts of Hobart, an excitable bunch of toddlers and their tired parents assemble for a playgroup unlike most others. The children arrive in twos and threes and rush to enjoy the toys, crafts and outdoor equipment as the adults watch on, tightly clutching what for many is their first hot cuppa of the day.

This is the multiples playgroup hosted by the Tasmanian Multiple Birth Association.

Held at the Clarence Plains Child and Family Centre, this group has provided support for many a frazzled parent needing the advice and understanding of others raising multiples (twins, triplets or more).

British comedian Michael McIntyre jokes that "people who don't have children think they know what it's like to have children". "Sleeping?!" he laughs. "People without children turn to each other at night and say 'good night darling, sleep well', and the other one goes 'I will'. That's how cocky, how arrogant you are ... It's been a long time since my wife and I said goodnight to each other. Now we just go 'good luck'."

For parents of multiples, who are in the spotlight as we celebrate Multiple Birth Awareness Week from February 24 to March 3, this joke is repeated with dark humour. The greater incidence of high-risk pregnancies, difficult or premature births and extended stays in hospital means that multi-parents often start their journey already exhausted.

Combined with sleep deprivation, financial strain and difficulties managing everyday activities with two (or more) babies at once, multi-parents have a higher risk of developing perinatal depression, anxiety and feelings of social isolation.

A survey of 1000 multi-mums by the UK-based Twins and Multiple Births Association found about 17 per cent of respondents had been diagnosed with postnatal depression and a further 18 per cent thought they may have suffered from it.

Rates of postnatal depression in the wider population sit at approximately 10 per cent of mothers and between three and seven per cent of fathers.

When my twin boys arrived three years ago, I was blissfully (perhaps wilfully) ignorant of these statistics, and of just how ex-

haunting the marathon I was embarking upon would be. I had worked the occasional night in previous jobs, but had always had time to recover the next day, with the cocky expectation of rest that Michael McIntyre refers to.

Now, the two little people I'd helped to create were wearing me down in a 24/7 battle of wills.

As with many twin pregnancies, our boys were born prematurely, at just over 34 weeks, and required a month-long stay in hospital before they were strong enough to be discharged. Leaving them behind as we headed home each evening felt surreal, the reality of being parents-of-two with a quiet, empty nursery sitting heavily on us.

By the time we brought them home from hospital we were itching to be "normal" parents and felt confident that we could handle the challenge.

Soon, though, the four-hourly feeds slipped to every three hours, then every two, then every 90 minutes. It was taking me an hour to breastfeed both boys, often with one crying as he waited for his brother to finish. I would snatch less than an hour's sleep myself before starting all over again.

At least once, most nights, my husband would stumble in to rock one boy while I fed the other, staring bleary eyed as the clock ticked on, both of us wondering how he'd cope the next day in his high-stress job.

I was so tired that my normal forgetfulness advanced to epic proportions, and often I couldn't remember whether I'd fed the dogs or washed my hair that morning.

More worrying, though, it became increasingly difficult to leave the house. Simply getting ready required a level of motivation and energy my exhausted brain refused to muster most days. The merry-go-round of feeding, changing and dressing two small people, getting them in the car and to our destination before it all needed to be done again left little time to actually achieve or enjoy the reason for being out in the first place.

I never mastered the art of tandem feeding, so the risk that one boy would need to be left crying while the other was being fed often deterred me from taking them into crowded or quiet places where they might disturb others.

More and more I found myself turning down social invitations, for fear the double pram would be too wide for the venue, or I'd have to spend the entire time attending to babies, or that the effort to get all of us ready would make us too late.

Often a week or more would pass when I didn't venture further than our front gate.

Many of the options available to mums of "singletons" (a word unknown to my vocabulary before having twins), such as going for a walk, taking swimming lessons, or popping into the shop with bub on a hip were impossible to me. Getting the boys to nap was increasingly difficult, and the usual options of patting, rocking or feeding are a challenge with two. Everything seemed far too difficult and I began to envy my single-baby friends.

By the time the boys were six months old my sense of isolation and anxiety had reached a peak, and the confidence that I'd carried home from hospital was long gone.

It was around this time that I discovered a "multiple mums" Facebook group facilitated by TasMBA. These women shared advice and experience on overcoming similar issues, and I began to feel that the difficulties I was dealing with no longer seemed impossible.

We organised catch-ups in venues big enough for our military convoy of tank-like double prams and where more than the usual one high chair was available. Each week many of these mums made a beeline for the TasMBA multiples playgroup.

Karen Pregnell first attended the playgroup when she was pregnant with her twins Ava and Ben, now almost three years old, and was worried how she would cope.

"Meeting the friendly faces and seeing their happy kids reassured me I would be OK," she says. Now she goes along most weeks as the support and friendship she has fostered are important.

"The other parents understand what it is like to have two toddlers crying at the same time," she says, "and the stress and guilt this brings when you can't be everything to everyone ... I don't feel judged."

Many of the parents who attend have relied on the playgroup to help them through some of the more challenging aspects of parenting multiples.

Vanessa Hughes, mum to one-year-olds Zac and Tanner, developed postnatal depression soon after her sons were born. After six years of struggling to fall pregnant, Vanessa was upset

Clockwise from right: Tanner and Zac Hughes, 1, with mum Vanessa Hughes; parents and children at the Tasmanian Multiple Birth Association playgroup at Clarence Plains Child and Family Centre; Harriet and Lio Stirling, 1, with mum Cy Stirling.

Pictures: RICHARD JUPE



when she was not permitted to touch or hold them for more than eight hours after their birth.

"That's when it all started," Vanessa says. "I haven't been the same since, and I struggle to leave them with anyone but my husband and a close friend."

"When I'm home alone with them some days I feel trapped and lonely [and] I end up finding myself crying over nothing. Without the multiples playgroup I don't know if I'd have got through [this] first year."

Elise Murray also credits the multiples playgroup as a source of support. "It makes you feel 'normal', she says. "I gained a sense of community, and an invaluable insight into just how lucky I was to have two healthy boys."

After enjoying a relatively normal pregnancy at 30 weeks she was diagnosed with HELLP Syndrome, a life-threatening liver disorder often likened to a severe type of preeclampsia.

Her twins Charlie and Ted (now 18 months) were born via caesarian at 33 weeks and spent five weeks in hospital before they could go home.

During this time the twins had trouble feeding and one had to be transferred to a different hospital. Elise struggled to produce enough breast milk and the experience left her suffering "feelings of inadequacy and fear that I wasn't able to provide everything my babies needed."

She sought help from her GP when the boys were eight weeks old and has found therapy, medication, time and the support of other parents have helped to regain her confidence.

For me, meeting other multiples parents validated that raising twins is tough and helped ease the sense of failure I had been carrying.

The new identity I had been struggling to accept since the birth of my sons began to feel OK, and bit-by-bit everyday challenges like convincing them to take a nap felt more manageable.

Fast forward three years and we have not only survived but thrived, due in large part to the support and encouragement of the Tasmanian multiples community.



For more information or support, visit:
www.tasmba.org.au
www.panda.org.au
 If you or anyone you know needs help, contact:
 Lifeline 13 11 14; MensLine Australia 1300 789 978; BeyondBlue 1300 22 46 36

