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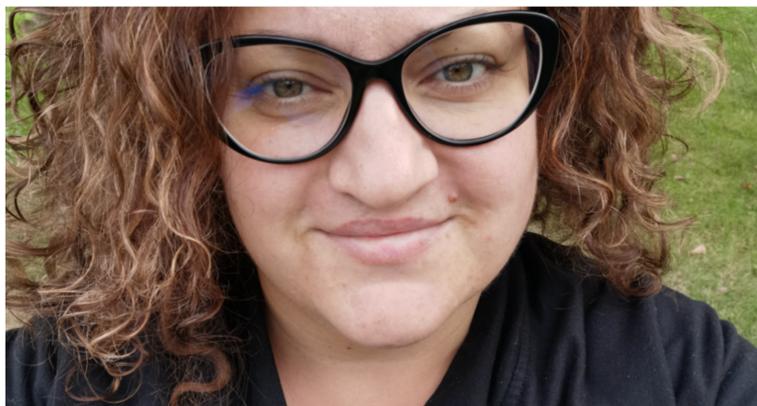
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Patricia's Story



How technology is revolutionizing mental healthcare for new moms



These days, when Patricia sits down at her kitchen table and connects with her Women's College Hospital psychiatrist on her laptop, she thinks back to the days when seeing a doctor would have been next to impossible. Those were the days when she could hardly get out of bed – unable to even shower, let alone get in her car, drive to the hospital, find parking and wait for her appointment.

After giving birth to her daughter in 2007, Patricia was overcome by a sense of hopelessness and despair. Sleepless for days on end, refusing to see visitors and even feeling she couldn't look after her newborn daughter, she quickly realized something was terribly wrong.

"I couldn't do anything except stay upstairs crying," she says. "I didn't even want to hold my baby. I finally said to my husband, 'I'm not good. Something's wrong.'"

Patricia's husband took her to see her physician at Women's College Hospital's Family Practice Health Centre, who quickly referred her to the hospital's Reproductive Life Stages (RLS) Program – a unique clinical and research program focused on women's mental health during the time of pregnancy and the postpartum period. It's the largest of its kind in Canada.

Patricia was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a condition that may affect up to half of women who experience severe postpartum depression. Her care team helped her to stabilize, and Patricia continues to be an active patient of the RLS Program to maintain her mental health.

But over the past couple of months, the majority of her appointments have taken the form of video chats with her psychiatrist, Dr. Alicja Fishell, from the comfort of home. The move to virtual care for eligible patients of the Reproductive Life Stages Program is a major milestone in Women's College Hospital's bold vision to become Canada's first virtual hospital.

Offering care virtually where appropriate for patients and their providers is the solution that's urgently needed to take the strain off Canada's overburdened health system, says Dr. Danielle Martin, Women's College Hospital's Executive Vice President and Chief Medical Executive.

"The idea is that patients should ultimately only be coming into the hospital when they and their provider have determined that a physical visit is what's best for their unique needs," says Dr. Martin. "Otherwise, virtual visits are ideal for a significant portion of the patient population. Not only are virtual visits more convenient for patients, but they also help to reduce wait times to see specialists and alleviate pressure on emergency departments."

Patricia, who lives in Vaughan, says her virtual visits with Dr. Fishell have significantly reduced her stress levels by eliminating the need to drive into the city every time she has an appointment. And because she's able to see Dr. Fishell more frequently – each video visit is 20 minutes long and the two meet about once a week – she says the quality of care she's receiving has improved too.

"If you're trying to get an in-person appointment, it's rare for any hospital to be able to schedule more than one visit a month unless there are cancellations," she says. "But this way, we can see each other regularly and there's no additional time impact for either of us. I'm also more present for each appointment because I'm not worrying about whether my parking is about to expire or if I have somewhere else to be."

Dr. Fishell says that the option to receive care virtually is particularly impactful for new moms, who often face a myriad of barriers to attending in-person appointments – from the negative effects of depression, anxiety and insomnia to difficulty scheduling appointments around their babies' nap schedules or their older children's activities.

"It's often harder for new moms to get out of the house," says Dr. Fishell. "So virtual care has been an extremely useful tool for making sure we're able to access women at a time when they may really need care but just aren't able to leave home to access it."

With the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Fishell says virtual care has become even more valuable for physicians and patients. "I've had multiple patients tell me that they wouldn't even consider leaving the house for an in-patient appointment because of physical distancing requirements, so the ability to still provide them with care while they stay at home has been fantastic," she says.

"Whether virtual care is needed because of a pandemic, bad weather or a patient's preference, it's all about enhancing access to care and getting patients the help they need – when, where and how they need it."

Thinking back on those days in 2007 when the simple act of getting out of bed seemed impossible, Patricia says that virtual care is revolutionary for patients like her. "With virtual care, you don't even have to get out of your pyjamas," she says. "It's easy, it's flexible, it's simple to use and it's private. You're able to get the therapy you need, get your prescriptions filled and get back to your day. It's been amazing."

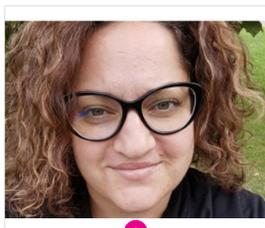
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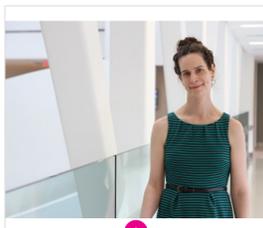
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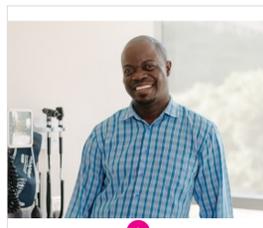
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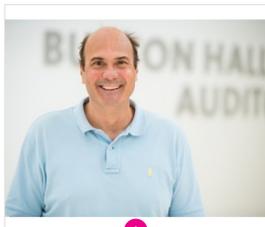
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