

Single Parenting: A Journey of Resilience and Faith

Interview with Steph

Jo: There are a number of single parent families in Australia today. Some choose to raise their children on their own, and sometimes it can arise from circumstances beyond our control.

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Jo: Hi, this is Messages of hope, and I'm Jo Chamberlain. Today, Steph shares her journey of single parenting right from the early stages of her pregnancy, and we hear her story of resilience and faith in the face of the unknown.

So, Steph, I know you're a mum to a gorgeous little boy. And I know your journey hasn't always been as a single parent, but do you want to tell me a bit more about your story?

Steph: I am a teacher; I became a teacher in 2015. I've been teaching for about nine years. I'm really into sports – I play netball, watch the footy. I got married at 25. We'd been together for about three years. The marriage was really good, and then we decided we wanted to have a kid. We'd just found out I was pregnant with Henley and he was absolutely planned. We were very excited. We'd done two weeks of knowing that we were expecting and being in that really positive bubble. And I told my family, and we told his family. And then seven weeks pregnant, the marriage broke down. So, I became a single mum when I was seven weeks pregnant.

Jo: That must have been a rollercoaster of emotions for you.

Steph: Yes, absolutely. We were very excited to be pregnant. And we were so hopeful for that trajectory. Then we ended.

I was still overjoyed to be expecting but then also very nervous, and then also devastated at the loss of my marriage and devastated at the loss of having my partner. We were very connected and then that was being taken away.

And then just the unknowns of, I don't know how to raise a child. I don't even know what it's like to have a child. I don't know how to deal with a newborn. And that's what's happening to me! I'm growing a child; that's going to happen. And I'm doing it on my own.
So that was a wild ride.

I didn't know anyone who had been in that same situation of being a single mum while pregnant. Most of the time it happens when you've already got a child.

This was a new experience, something that I didn't expect. It was left-field. And I had nothing to model how to deal with that.

Jo: Did you get support from anywhere?

Steph: We were actually doing marriage counselling prior to splitting, and as soon as we separated, I contacted our marriage counsellor straight away. And she talked me through how to handle the immediate issues that I had, like protecting myself, my mental state, thinking about what I needed right then and there, not thinking too far ahead, just focusing on my immediate needs and how to process it all.

Jo: What exactly with the counsellor helped you through?

Steph: The focus on my immediate needs.

Naturally when something railroads you, go into a little bit of a, 'how do I fix this?' Or you start thinking about the future. You start going, 'Oh, I'm going to be single forever. I'm worthless.' You start having really unhelpful thoughts. She helped me focus on what I needed to help me get through the now.

Jo: I can see why in a situation like that, it would be quite natural to become overwhelmed by so many possibilities of what could happen next. And like you said, with that future dynamic of not knowing where things were going to go, our natural instinct is to worry. But to be able to piece it down into the now sounds quite like it was really helpful for you.

Steph: Yeah, and some of the things that she encouraged me to do, was how to deal with people around me wanting to help me, and where to seek support. And one thing that she said that has resonated with me is that people want to help, but they don't know how to help. So being really clear and saying what you need at that point is very helpful to them to then best support you. You're not going to offend them by saying, 'I need time today. It's not a good day, don't come over.' Or the other way around: 'I need to get out of the house. Can we go for a walk?'

Sometimes it's really tough to ask for help, but just ask what you need in that time because people want to help in the way that suits you.

Jo: So, skipping forward to, you've just had the baby, what was it like coming home for the first time?

Steph: It was nerve wracking. I was worried about all sorts of things. Some of the things that you need to learn, like breastfeeding and nappy changes and all of that sort of stuff. But also, because we had separated early on, I had things in place at this point to make sure it was a little bit easier. And that was that my mum took some time off of work. She stayed in my spare room, and she cooked for me. So that's not something that I had to do.

I also had my ex-mother-in-law make me meals as well, people dropping in and helping me out. I had plenty of support. So that was great.

Jo: Can you ever get too much support?

Steph: Yeah, absolutely. When you're navigating a newborn, what normally wouldn't have overwhelmed you, now would overwhelm you because you've got a lot of other things that you're trying to juggle and learn and look after this little bundle of joy. And so having people come over all the time and drop in and stay for too long can be super overwhelming.

Finding the people that you're okay to be your authentic self with and you're okay for them to see the ugly and for them to see you crying, see you sad, see you angry - that's important.

Jo: What was it like then, when all the guests left and you were there just with you and the baby? Did you find moments of challenge there?

Steph: Absolutely. The nights were definitely the hardest - battling sleepless nights. You're also battling your own mental state as you're trying to navigate a very new and real separation. And you're also battling: 'I don't know what this baby needs.' And so, you're looking for different supports, and you're googling the different symptoms that your kid might have. And sometimes Google can not be your best friend. Doing that all on your own early days is really tough.

Also, the challenges have actually changed over time as Henley has gotten older and I'm getting further away from the separation. Life as a single mum is absolutely busy, but the busyness actually changes, depending on how old the kid is and potentially how far away from the separation you are.

Jo: So, what are your challenges now that you're facing as a single parent?

Steph: Now, it's also the juggling of work, juggling of a whole bunch of different factors. I had a year of maternity leave, and so I had a year where I could focus on how to deal with a baby.

In the second year of Henley's life, I went back to work and then I'm juggling mum life, work life, a social life. Trying to do all of that *and* managing a household, *and* doing all of those jobs. Structure becomes very important in that, and how you manage time. And also, factoring in sleep, potentially at the expense of other things.

Knowing that your capacity is different. So, if you've spent this much time being social, it needs to come to an end so that you can go home, get a good night's sleep and back it up for the next day. Because there's no breaks. When you finish at work, you move on to your mum role and then when you finish your mum role, then you need to do a couple of things to manage the house and then you have to do a couple of things to manage your own wellbeing.

And the wellbeing needs to be a very big priority, because if you are not feeling great, then you can't show up for the other jobs that you've got going forward. And there's no one to take that responsibility on for you. So, you don't have a choice, you've just got to keep going. So, prioritising your health is a big thing.

Prioritising things that are going to fill up your cup so that you can show up for your various roles.

Jo: And it sounds so easy to dismiss that as a priority because we think, 'well, the other important things need to happen first.' So, knowing that you can just have that rest or even respite as well, where you can pass the baby on to somebody else for a little while who also loves and cares for this child and not having that sense of guilt behind it.

Steph: Yeah, the guilt is real. But it's also important to move past, because if you are focusing on filling up your cup, then the rest falls into place, and you can actually show up and do those things that you need to do.

So, as an example, a couple of people have mentioned how busy my life is and they're like, 'how do you find the time to play netball?' I find the time to play netball because that fills my cup and if I don't have that, then I'm not going to feel my best self in the other aspects of my life, and then that would all unravel. So, I prioritise that I'm going to play netball. And so, how can I juggle other things to make sure that that happens so that I can keep being the best mum that can be, so that I can keep working and doing those sorts of things?

Jo: I understand that your faith and a relationship with God has been part of your life through the challenges of single parenting. How do you see God in all of this?

Steph: A big source of peace and a big source of someone to turn to. Any issue that I have, I have a conversation, I connect in that sense.

But just constantly going back into a space of prayer. And prayer looks different for different people, but for me it's a thought; I think in my prayer. Some people write, and that's really great. But for me, it's like a conversation and I constantly go back to it. When I notice that I'm getting anxious, then I will sit, I will pray.

And I have a Bible verse that underpins my faith and where I get a fair bit of my support and hope from: Philippians 4 verses 6 to 7:

'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

That is my favourite verse in that it's a good reminder for me to not be anxious and to go to God with your anxiousness.

And the thanksgiving part is really critical in that I find if you focus on the good first, go to God and start thinking about what you're thankful for in life, that's a really good place to start a prayer.

And then when you've covered the things that you're thankful for, mention the things that are hurting, and sit with God in what's tough and ask him to help in that space.

And then it says, 'And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

So, after you've prayed in that way, I have found from my experience that I have a weird, abnormal sense of peace.

I've battled a fair bit of stuff with single parenting, and single parenting from before my son was even born. And I have been at peace with a lot of it. And I think it's because that Bible verse.

Jo: Has your perspective on single parenting changed since you've had your experience?

Steph: Yeah, absolutely. And the more that I meet other single parents, the more I realise there is no one size fits all with single parenting. Everyone's relationship has broken down for different reasons. You can share similar challenges, but there is no one size fits all with how someone ended up being a single parent.

Jo: So, knowing that there might be some listeners out there who are single parents themselves and perhaps struggling with similar struggles to you, what sort of words of encouragement can you offer to them?

Steph: Definitely find the people that you're truly comfortable with. Knowing that there's going to be people that you can turn to with one aspect, and you can turn to another group of people for something else. And acknowledging people's strengths and weaknesses and level of understanding of what you're going through.

I think it's also really important to find people that do understand single parenting. You might find connections with people that you didn't even expect to as well. Because just like you don't understand what parenting is like until you become a parent, people can't truly understand what single parenting is like until they are a single parent. To some extent you need to come to peace with that - that you're not going to be able to explain the full extent of the challenges.

And being gracious towards people that don't get it. But then also trying to be open to talking about the challenges so that you can find connections where you don't expect to find connections.

Because there's always people that are going through something similar.

And I'm a big believer that God places people in our lives as well, and so being open to that.

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