



MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH NOW

supporting the well-being of growing families

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I had longed for a third baby for many, many years. When my second child was almost 3, I got pregnant, but sadly miscarried at 10 weeks. After the miscarriage (which was due to a hormone abnormality), my cycles became irregular for the next year. I finally got them regulated through medication and became pregnant very quickly. I was initially very excited and could not wait to meet my third baby. I struggled through the sickness and exhaustion of the first trimester. However, I felt strange right away. My mood began to sink and I sometimes had suicidal thoughts. I thought this was strange because I was happy and having a great time with my kids. I also began to have trouble sleeping. Not that this is unusual for a pregnant woman, but the sleep was peppered with anxiety. I began to wonder how I would manage three kids and how I would survive the babyhood of another child. I began to contemplate terminating the pregnancy. But by this point, I was 20 weeks and the option of terminating seemed to have come and gone.

I met with a psychiatrist and told him what I was experiencing. He prescribed an antidepressant that I held off taking. I began to sleep less and less...and the pregnancy progressed. I started to have more and more anxiety and became convinced that having a baby was the wrong thing for me. I began to swirl in an endless anxiety that was intolerable. I began trying many different medications, to no avail. By this point I was no longer sleeping at all. I had gotten to the point of contemplating suicide on a daily basis. Bridges looked like good places. I wanted to jump off one into the oncoming traffic. I researched ways to terminate the pregnancy and thought of going to a late term termination place. By now, I was at the very end of my pregnancy and everyone was very concerned - including myself. I had planned for a home birth. However, I was advised to deliver in the hospital so my mental state could be monitored. I still decided to deliver at home.

The birth went off without a hitch. I delivered the baby in my bathroom after 45 minutes of labor. I saw her and held her. But, I was immediately overcome with an intense anxiety and had trouble being close to her or around her. I did not sleep with her that night. The next night I had a panic attack and left the house for the night. I struggled to know what to do. I wanted to take the baby and go to a hospital. But no one could locate one for me. Things began to get worse. When I tried to nurse the baby, I would vomit. When I was near her I would shake uncontrollably. My husband sought out hormonal treatments for me. I realize now that this was a huge mistake. I needed medication immediately. But it did not happen. I was awake. All night every night. I was unable to take naps or rest. I paced my house in an anxiety laden state - unable to sit still, watch a movie, or do much of anything. I kept repeating, "wouldn't it be better if we didn't have a baby?" "I shouldn't have had the baby." "I can't take care of the baby" "Please please take the baby away" "I shouldn't have had the baby." "I shouldn't have had the baby." My husband became furious. He could not understand why a woman would reject her child. He stopped speaking to me a few weeks in and ignored me.

I felt so alone. And I began to become more and more psychotic. I began to google ways to commit suicide. I stopped sleeping all together. I went for days without seeing my baby. I tried to admit myself to the hospital

and they would not take me. Our therapist did not see the signs and simply thought I did not want the baby. As did my husband. We began to fight all the time. He yelled at me and screamed and told me what a horrible person I was. I tried to function on 2 hours of sleep. It did not work. The baby spent her days in our guesthouse with a nanny and I continued to refuse to see her. I could no longer stand the thought of breastfeeding and she began to be bottle fed. I saw her even less. My eyes took on a deep blackness to them, and bags hung around them. My two older children became frightened. They were 5 and 9 at the time. I could no longer care for them. I drove them places with two hours of sleep. I tried my best, but I was sinking so so fast. I crashed my car. I began to take benzo's every night and sometimes during the day. I tried more meds. I had bottles and bottles of medications lined up above my bed. My son brought me different pill bottles at night. My husband continued to refuse to speak to me. My friends grew increasingly worried. I began to nervously crunch ice day and night. I walked in circles unable to talk to anyone. My friends tried to talk to me but they could not. I made no sense and would talk in "loops". These loops centered around the baby and how I did not want her, could not care for her, should not have had her. The loop would start again, and again.

I was desperate for help, but too sick to get it. My husband had completely abandoned me by this point. No longer speaking to me except to scream. My parents were baffled and also told me I was a horrible person and a terrible mother. I had nowhere to turn. My husband announced he wanted a divorce. I lost it. I drove to my friend's workplace, crying. I confessed that I had gone to look at guns. I had not slept in weeks and my pants dragged on the floor, drenched in dirt and mud. I was a mess. My friend did not waste time. She called my parents and told them that I needed to be checked in somewhere. No one knew of the mother baby unit that exists in North Carolina. No one knew of anywhere except a place in Arizona. I said goodbye to my other two children and was whisked off. My elder daughter carried the baby and said in a hushed voice, "Mommy has to go away so that she can hold you".

The place in Arizona was mostly geared toward drug addicts, so I found myself in groups with 18 year old heroin addicts. Not ideal...to say the least. But soon they managed to wean me off the benzos and get me on a medication track that got me sleeping. My husband still refused to speak to me, and would often not let me talk to my own children, which was heartbreaking. I began to realize he could not separate me from my illness. It was very sad and made my depression so much worse. He was simply unwilling to forgive and allow me the space to heal. He took the rejection of the baby very personally and was never able to recover from that. In the end he filed for divorce - yet another blow. I did complete my time in Arizona, even extending two weeks to fully heal. My official diagnosis was postpartum psychosis. I often wondered if I had gotten help sooner ,could I have kept our family together? If I had found the mother baby unit, could I have continued breastfeeding? Would my daughter and I ever be ok?

It has been 20 months and I still struggle, but I am ok. This is not an experience that I would ever wish upon anyone. It took every ounce of my being to fight for myself and to know that the illness was not who I was. I look back on it and it seems almost surreal. I see pictures and can't remember much of anything. My hope is that someone will hear my story and know that there is help, that they will get better. I think so much of my depression and anxiety hinged on the fact that I could not believe that I would ever heal, that this was who I was. Of course, psychosis is no walk in the park either. And I now realize part of the disease/ illness was my believing all the crazy thoughts my brain was feeding me. I was convinced that I truly did not want the baby, and that she was sure to ruin our lives. I just believed it. Of course, I now know that is not the case, and I love her with all my heart, even though I have to work through my PTSD that she sometimes stirs up. And, of course, I wish I had gotten help sooner, and been placed in a mother baby unit. As our attachment was so disrupted from all the separation we had to endure in order for me to get help.