



# MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH NOW

supporting the well-being of growing families

## Diane Chen

I write this now from the other side of a very dark experience. Sometimes, I think of it as losing myself into a black hole of despair. Now my days are warm and bright and filled with promise and hope (and a lot of activity!), but it took a long time to get here.

Getting pregnant was both a miracle and a dream come true for me and my husband. We had been down a long fertility road of doing hormones and shots and procedures, all to no avail. We had been told that our chances of conceiving were incredibly slim. We weren't even viable candidates for IVF. Emotionally drained by the rollercoaster ride that we had been on, we had taken a break "from the whole fertility thing." And then, out of the blue, we got pregnant! I took about 12 home pregnancy tests, in addition to the two I took at the doctor's office, just to convince myself that this was real -- that I was really, truly, pregnant.

Of course, we were beyond overjoyed and we felt like providence had given us a special gift. Being pregnant was incredibly difficult, however. I started bleeding early in the pregnancy and the thought of losing our miraculous child loomed large in front of us. I was told that my three quarters of my placenta had become detached and was put on full bedrest, not even allowed to shower. Every time we went to the OB's office I braced myself for the news that we had lost our baby. Defying all of my anxieties, she always showed up on the ultrasound, wiggling around and proving to us that she was alive and well.

I managed to make it through the pregnancy, and our daughter surprised us by coming about a month early. She was tiny, but she was healthy. We were allowed to go home after two and half days, but came right back to the hospital when her temperature kept dropping and dropping and dropping. My husband and I were terrified that we were going to lose her. We did our time in the NICU and our little one rallied. Exhausted and relieved, we finally went home to begin our journey into parenthood.

Looking back, it is easy to see why I developed post-partum and how much at risk for it I was. At the time, however, it was the furthest thing from my mind. The sad truth is, because of what I "thought I knew" about PPD, I completely did not recognize it when it reared its ugly head in our lives.

What I DID know, was that I was slowly falling apart. Falling apart so much that when my child was nine months old, I got up before the crack of dawn, left a note for my sleeping husband, and at the first faint glimmer of light, I walked out the door. In my mind, I was never coming back. I was going to either figure out some way to kill myself, or simply turn myself in.

You see, for the previous nine months, I had a postpartum depression that went totally undiagnosed. Not that I can blame anyone, I did a REALLY good job of hiding everything that was wrong. I always tried really hard to

look like I was OK, that I "had it together," that I was the perfect mom – but in reality, I was sleeping only 20 or 30 minutes a night, at most. I was totally baffled as to why taking care of a baby was so incredibly hard for me. I was terrified of every little thing, terrified that she might just suddenly stop breathing, terrified that someone was going to snatch her out of our car while I was putting things away in the trunk, terrified that she was going to fall off of the diaper table and get a horrible injury, you name it. I wouldn't even give her a bath by myself. I was afraid I might look away for even just a moment and she would drown.

Somewhere along the way, my thinking had gotten derailed and it just kept going down that crooked path. I started to fear that someone was going to break into our apartment and steal her, so I had to sleep on the floor between the window and her crib, even though that meant that I couldn't sleep at all. My milk supply had been a constant battle to keep up, and I started to worry that she was going to dehydrate. When she didn't even make it onto the growth chart at her six-month check-up, I started thinking that I was messing up, that I wasn't doing a good job. And then, she failed to crawl by nine months, and I started thinking very weird things. In my mind, she was never going to crawl, ever, and it was all my fault. And because she would never crawl, she would never walk. She was going to spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair, and it was all my fault. (Today I know that some babies skip crawling all together, but at the time, and my altered mental state, my theory made perfect sense to me.). I slipped from postpartum depression into psychosis. I became convinced that if I stayed with my baby, she was going to die. I absolutely believed it.

That is what led me to go out the door on that cold October morning, with only a warm coat and some cash in my pocket. I truly, in the core of my being, believed that I was doing what was best for my child. I thought that I was utterly defective, that I had to be some kind of monster that must be destroyed. The sad thing is, postpartum wasn't even on my radar screen. I thought you only had post-partum in the first few months after birth. I thought it would feel like being really moody, or emotional, or angry, like a severe case of PMS, and I was none of those things. Quite the opposite, I felt utterly empty. I had no emotion. Sometimes I actually thought that I had no soul.

Fortunately for our family, I did not manage to find a way to kill myself on that cold October morning. I spent a couple of days wandering around the city, not sleeping or eating. On the second day, I managed to call a friend, who somehow convinced me to call my husband, who immediately came and got me. All I wanted at that moment was a very large soda -- I don't think I had had a single drop to drink since I left the house.

I am very glad that I was still alive. I wish I could say that it all was better from there, but that wouldn't be the truth. A doctor, who is also our good friend, told me that I had post-partum. I didn't believe it. I thought I knew what postpartum was. But I thought I would just humor everyone, and I agreed to go to a hospital. I spent three weeks in a locked facility, and then I spent several months in an outpatient program. Both the facility and the outpatient program were not intended to deal with postpartum and were NOT the right place for me. In fact, I honestly think I got much worse before I finally got better.

None of the care I received actually addressed the post-partum that I had been experiencing. I was given a lot of drugs and I had horrible reactions to them. After three weeks, I was semi-paralyzed. I couldn't chew solid food. I couldn't even go to the bathroom by myself. A nurse at the outpatient program recognized my condition as a reaction to the meds, and sent me back to the hospital where they spent a day flushing everything out of my system and giving me a strong antidote. I then went through a couple of months going to specialists to deal with the various reactions to the meds I had been on. I am very fortunate that nothing was permanent.

Finally, I was able to piece my life back together. It was not easy. I finally figured out, on my own, that I really did have postpartum depression and then psychosis. No one at the hospital had sat down and talked to me specifically about my condition. I wasn't even told that I had been diagnosed with Postpartum Psychosis. I just happened to see it on one of my records. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, the "No Harm Protocol" was dropped from my status and I was able to start the process of being reunited with my baby (who, in the meantime, had turned one and was starting to walk.) Understandably, she did not seem to remember me, so this was a bit of a difficult journey. After a few months of getting reacquainted with each other, I was able to bring her home and our family was reunited at last. Looking at us today you would never know that we had ever been apart. She is a happy, bouncy, four-year-old, whose every third sentence is "Mommy, Mommy!"

My husband, through all of this, was a quiet tower of strength. If it wasn't for his love and determination to keep our family together, I don't think we would have ever made it out of the darkness. I don't think the world will ever know how strong he really is. Somehow, he had enough faith for all of us, and we are now standing on the other side of this journey. It feels like we have gone through a black hole and somehow made it out the other side. All I can think now is: if there is any way I can keep someone from going through the nightmare that I went through, I want to do that. Whatever it is. Then this won't have all been for nothing.

Thank you for reading my story.