



MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH NOW

supporting the well-being of growing families

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I often feel like I could be the poster child for postpartum anxiety. During the past 7 ½ years, I have had three children and with each birth, had entirely different experiences. With all of my pregnancies, I felt really incredible emotionally. Aside from the early nausea and lightheadedness, I felt energetic, excited and happy for my babies to arrive. I ran or cycled daily, and was able to multitask all of the components of my life with ease. Then postpartum, things changed rapidly.

My first baby was born in October 2004, when I was 31 years old. My son was born via emergency cesarean section after I had been induced and labored unsuccessfully for two and a half days. Being awake for over 60 hours straight before the baby even arrived only compounded the anxiety that I would feel when my son actually arrived. The week after we returned from the hospital, I felt like a zombie. I couldn't sleep even when the baby was sleeping. I felt wholly overwhelmed.

The next couple of months, I felt like I was barely managing. I was completely panicked when I had to be alone with the baby, which was basically 5 days a week for 12 hours per day. I lived in a constant state of anxiety, but I looked forward to the December holidays when I would have 3 other adults able

to help me with this little newborn. Of course, the break was excellent as I didn't feel like I was solely responsible for our baby. Yet, it almost made my anxiety worse, since I began to have anticipatory anxiety about my family members going back to work in January.

The day my husband and mother had to return to work couldn't have been worse. A torrential storm arrived the previous weekend and had not let up. The baby awoke at 5 am that morning and I knew I couldn't take him outside in the rain. I would be trapped in the house alone with him for at least 12 hours, a thought that sent me into sheer panic. I begged my husband not to go to work. My nausea increased so significantly that I began throwing up. My appetite was non-existent. My heart raced continuously and my fingers felt tingly. I began having full-blown panic attacks. Not knowing what to do, my husband called my good friend, who stayed with me for the next few days. She took care of the baby for me while I stared into space, ruminating about my

ruined life. It was only then, in January, that I began to see my psychiatrist. After the first appointment, after which I immediately began an anti-anxiety medication, it took about three weeks until I felt a happy self again.

My second baby was born in August 2007. With my daughter, I could tell 12 hours postpartum that my anxiety was returning. Resting in the hospital, I could feel all of the physiological symptoms of my postpartum anxiety return. My heart felt like it was constantly racing, my skin tingled and I felt nauseous. When I was left alone in my room with the baby, even if she was sleeping, I began to panic. I called my therapist from the hospital and began taking my regular anti-anxiety medication. It would take several weeks for the medication to kick in. Thankfully, my mother lived with us for those weeks, and basically cared for the baby at night so I could get sleep. The combination of my family and the medication got me through those first few weeks, until I felt normal again.

Planning for my third baby, I researched extensively about staying on my anti-anxiety medication during pregnancy, rather than starting immediately postpartum. Although my anxiety dissipated several weeks after the birth of my second child, it wasn't worth feeling so miserable, even for a short period of time. And now, I had other children to care for. With the advice of my psychiatrist, I stayed on my medication throughout my pregnancy and had zero anxiety postpartum. It was an incredible feeling to be completely at ease the third time around and able to enjoy every moment of motherhood, anxiety free.