



MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH NOW

supporting the well-being of growing families

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Mental illness is something that's pretty much always been in my life. Either in the forefront or as a shadow behind me, it has been a constant presence. A close family member of mine has struggled with anxiety his entire life, and the disease has landed him in the hospital multiple times. And, tragically, my best childhood friend committed suicide when we were freshmen in college. Personally, I had also struggled with mild depression and anxiety since childhood, so I knew I was not immune.

But I had found ways to cope. I graduated from college, then law school, and then began my dream career as a legal aid attorney. I also met and married a wonderful man, and we started planning our family. I was fortunate enough to get pregnant easily and had a pretty uneventful pregnancy.

The trouble began during labor and after birth. I was in labor over two nights, not sleeping a wink either night, and ultimately had an emergency C-section. My daughter was finally delivered to me in my recovery room after I had been awake for over 60 hours. Utterly exhausted, I began crying, and the nurse told me to "snap out of it" because "my daughter could feel my pain."

When we returned home from the hospital, the anxiety began. It started with general worries about whether my baby was eating enough and whether she was breathing. But then it grew into something much bigger when my body essentially forgot how to sleep. I had always been a great sleeper, being able to fall asleep in seconds. But, now, I would lie down, close my eyes, and jolt up as if struck by lightning every time I heard even the tiniest sound coming from the monitor. I would then run over to the baby, tend to her needs, and return to my bed, waiting for my heart to explode with the next sound.

The first night without sleep was unsettling. The next was scary. And the third was just terrifying. That night, I would hear crying coming from the monitor and run over to the baby, only to find that she was still asleep. I thought I was going crazy. The next morning, I was in a total fog. I would think of something to say, and the words would come out of my mouth many seconds later. I would turn my head, and my vision would take ages to follow. Fortunately, I had a psychiatrist who prescribed me sleeping pills. I took one that day at 5:30pm and slept until the following morning.

But then the darkness set in. The thought that consumed my mind was that I had made a horrible, horrible mistake. An irreversible mistake. I could not go back in time and un-become a mother. The reality was that I was going to be a mother for the rest of my life—and a terrible one at that. I began believing that my husband and daughter would be better off without me and that I was only bringing them down. My lowest point was when I was at a stoplight, about to turn left, with a brick wall right ahead of me. All I had to do was fail to turn the wheel, and this misery would be over. The light turned green, and I thought of my friend who had

committed suicide. I remembered the suffering her family had endured. I would not allow my family to endure the same suffering. My friend ended up saving my life, and I am forever grateful to her for that.

Very slowly, the darkness started to lift. After four months, I began to see glimmers of light. After six months, I was able to sleep on my own without sleeping pills and able to feel joy again.

Two years later, I found myself pregnant again. In my second trimester, the darkness set in, as I became consumed with the dread of the misery repeating itself. This time, though, I decided to do something about it. I started seeing a perinatal psychiatrist, as well as a therapist specializing in maternal mental health. I developed a postpartum plan filled with support and self-care. And I was incredibly fortunate. This time, I was able to keep the darkness at bay and experience the joy of having a new baby.