

My story of Depression in Pregnancy

“At the age of 20, after an uneventful first pregnancy - and a very stressful labour - I had a beautiful, healthy baby girl delivered by emergency caesarean. My second pregnancy however, several years later, ended in miscarriage and the relationship I was in, didn't survive either. Not long after I met my second husband, I was diagnosed with extensive endometriosis and pelvic inflammatory disease. The Doctor at the hospital told me to “think beyond having children now”. I started an intensive treatment (injections in to my stomach every four weeks, for six months) which shut down my ovaries and caused a “quasi menopause”, meaning I had to take hormone replacement therapy tablets. I was just 27 years old.

So we couldn't believe it when, just over a year later, I fell pregnant - my husband and I were absolutely overjoyed. When I began to wash my hands excessively during the pregnancy, I didn't really think anything of it at first. I was tearful and had suffered periods of sadness in my life but had no reason to think I may be suffering with depression during my pregnancy. Crying in pregnancy was “perfectly normal” and how could I be depressed when I was so happy to be pregnant? Besides, I'd never heard of “ante-natal depression”.

But soon after the initial excitement of discovering I was pregnant, my behaviour changed. I wanted to stay in bed all the time. I didn't go out of the house and I didn't want to talk to anyone. Even with my husband and daughter, I was growing more and more irritable. Once I passed the twelve week “watershed”, I began to relax a little in to the pregnancy until at 18 weeks I had what appeared to be a show of blood. Although, after examination, I was told this was nothing to worry about, the thought that the pregnancy could go wrong at any time was almost all I could think about.

By the time I was about 32 weeks pregnant, I was a nervous wreck. All I could think about was my pregnancy and I was making weekly (if not more frequent) visits to the ante-natal ward to hear the baby's heartbeat, although this rarely reassured me. I was eating just for the sake of it, and my weight increased from 11 stone to 13 stone in a matter of weeks. I was washing my hands repeatedly to the point where the skin was so tight and dry, my hands would bleed. I was becoming increasingly paranoid and anxious, I began to think that the house we had just moved in to was haunted and I felt like everything was conspiring against me. I couldn't sleep even though I was exhausted and I was crying, inconsolably, for what seemed like hours at a time.

My husband assumed it was my hormones and all part of pregnancy. But I knew that wasn't it. Eventually, I decided to see my midwife and tell her everything. The way I saw it, I had nothing to lose if I was going mad anyway. I sat in her office and explained what I had been feeling. I didn't care how crazy I sounded, I needed help and I felt I had to confide in someone for my sake and the baby's.

My midwife, Zoe, sat and listened until I'd finished talking. To my complete amazement she told me she thought she might know what I was experiencing. She explained that some women, when pregnant, suffer from ante-natal depression - depression in pregnancy - and this can be for a number of different reasons. In my case, it was probably an overwhelming fear that I could lose the baby, because of the difficult labour I had with my daughter, my previous miscarriage and the fact that I had fallen pregnant under difficult circumstances. (Some women suffer because they hadn't planned to get pregnant and, for example, weren't sure if they wanted to keep the baby). I was showing signs of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) brought on by stress and had other symptoms which separated ante-natal depression from post-natal depression - although there were some similarities. The good news was that, for many women, there is a good chance they will feel better once the baby is born. She offered me counselling and regular check ups and I left her office that day feeling like I could breathe again.

After that, I had good days and bad days, but on the bad days I had to keep telling myself that I wasn't going mad and try to remain rational. It wasn't easy and in the end my husband took time off work in the weeks leading up to the birth so that I didn't have to be on my own at home. When my son was born, I cried hysterically - I was so happy and I could hardly believe he had made it.

I began to research ante-natal depression by looking it up on the Internet, but could find little information. I discovered a research project carried out by Dr. Jonathan Evans, a senior lecturer from Bristol University, in 2001 and also found a couple of old articles from the NCT (National Childbirth Trust) and BBC websites.

My midwife said there wasn't enough known about ante-natal depression and asked me if I'd consider helping to set up a support group. I agreed and, having spoken to Dr Evans, agreed to write an article about it too. We all felt it was important to raise awareness of this illness and how important support can be. Even now, when I tell some people of my experience - even close friends - they say "if that had been me, I'd have told myself to snap out of it". No one chooses to suffer from depression. It's an illness which requires acknowledgement, just like any other illness. If it hadn't been for my midwife taking the time to listen, I honestly don't know what may have happened. I just vividly remember how relieved I felt hearing her reassurance that I wasn't going crazy.

This is my story but everyone is different, every situation unique. I feel so much better now following the birth just as my midwife predicted, but my advice to anyone who recognises some of the "symptoms" as I have described them is to ask for help. I doubt you'll regret it."

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