

It's never too late to diagnose ADHD

CASE STUDY

Breanna is 36 and has been married to Ashley (Surveyor) for eight years. They have two sons, Louis six and Harry four. Breanna works part-time as a Mental Health Nurse, in a Community Mental Health Service in NSW's Blue Mountains, a role she's held for two years.

Breanna grew up in Queensland and has a brother Tim, who is five years younger than her. Her mother is a Nurse and drinks heavily. Her father is a retired bank teller and is a moderate drinker, often drinking when his wife insists. When her brother became a teenager, he became dependent on alcohol and drugs, which caused a lot of stress in the family. He managed to get work after he finished school but continues to have substance use issues and recently moved back home because his finances were deteriorating.

In primary school, Breanna did very well academically and had many friends. In high school, her grades declined and she experienced difficulties with her friendships.

She often struggled with regulating her emotions, noting particular difficulty at certain times in her menstrual cycle. At 18 she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and with social anxiety when she was 20.

Despite the struggles with her grades and friendships at high school, she went on to complete a Nursing degree and started working in an emergency department following graduation, when she was 23.

Breanna tried a few different workplaces, including roles in community health, working with people who had mental health challenges and were also affected by drugs and alcohol. Breanna felt this was a good fit, due to her family experience. Breanna loves her work but experienced some interpersonal clashes with management at several points in her career. When they occurred, she found her mental health spiraled down.

At 25, Breanna started a post graduate degree in Mental Health Nursing and worked part-time at the community health service. Around the same time, she met Ashley and their relationship became serious quite quickly.

Six months into her post graduate study, Breanna felt stressed and tired; was having issues with sleep and was feeling highly anxious about being able to successfully complete her studies. In the first year of her studies, she reached out to different health professionals about her mental health struggles, telling them, "I seem to take so much longer to finish my Uni work compared to other students". She received various diagnosis, ranging from general anxiety disorder, to borderline personality disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, with the most recent being anxiety and depression.

Breanna's GP prescribed Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) for her anxiety and depression. The SSRIs were initially successful. Eight months after being on the medication Breanna was feeling better but still felt they

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didn't really fix things. She often thought to herself "There must be something else wrong". She decided to wean herself off the SSRIs and asked her GP to test her iron and thyroid. Breanna also consulted with a naturopath for a while. These explorations didn't provide any answers.

Around the same time, Ashley proposed and they planned to marry in a year. Three months before their wedding she was feeling anxious and stressed and went back on SSRIs to help her get through the wedding.

Breanna fell pregnant three months after the wedding. When she became pregnant she stopped taking SSRIs because she was worried they would harm the baby. She worked right up until two weeks before Louis was born.

Breanna loved the first few months of motherhood, but then really struggled with feeling flat, bored and generally down. She was diagnosed with post-natal depression and commenced SSRIs. The medication helped and after taking seven months off work to focus on her mental health, she returned to work part-time. Breanna found that working part-time gave her some time to herself, away from Louis and she started to feel quite good.

When Louis was 12 months old, Breanna fell pregnant again. She went off her medication as she didn't feel comfortable taking SSRIs while pregnant, despite advice from her GP that it was safe.

After her second son's birth she became completely overwhelmed and felt like she couldn't cope with the simplest of daily tasks. Her marriage was struggling and she would frequently feel down and guilty about everything she felt she was failing at. Breanna

didn't think she should go back to work as she was finding it hard enough to cope with parenting and managing the household.

Once again, she went to the GP and said, "I feel incredibly overwhelmed with everything I have to do" and "I can't seem to stay on top of things", "I always seem to upset people when I don't mean to". The GP prescribed SSRIs again. This time she promised herself she would stay on the medication so her mental health remained more stable, allowing her to return to work and be a better mother.

Louis was diagnosed with ADHD when he was six. Relatives would comment that he was a 'spirited child, just like she had been'.

When researching ADHD she stumbled across an article about women being diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood. What she read made more sense to her than any other diagnosis she had been given, or any other explanation for her struggles. Breanna decided to go to her GP to discuss the possibility that she might have ADHD.