

## Perinatal Mental Health

I am a 41 year old woman, married to Wayne (for 13 years) and the mother of Maddison (age eight) and Jake (age five). I was a primary school teacher up until the birth of Maddison, after which I was a stay at home Mum.

My mother, who has provided me with significant home based support after the birth of both my children, was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder about 15 years ago. I have a younger sister and while we get on pretty well, we are very different.

I can remember experiencing anxiety, from as young as age four, and depression from my late teens. After repeated presentations at GP clinics with somatic symptoms (tingling in my mouth, heart palpitations, sweating, stomach pains and dizziness), one of the GPs I saw suggested that I was suffering from anxiety and panic attacks but did not prescribe any medication. A couple of years later, when my symptoms returned, I was referred to a psychiatrist who just talked with me and at the same time my GP prescribed various medications. I tried three different medications before giving them all up after about a month. In the first trimester of my pregnancy with Maddison I felt lethargic, bluesy, and constantly dizzy; I was worried initially but then the feelings subsided in the second trimester.

When Maddison was born I felt really anxious and had panic attacks for the first six weeks. I didn't let on about these feelings - neither to the GPs I regularly saw at my local medical clinic, nor with my obstetrician. I don't really know why - it just didn't feel right to not be happy about the birth of my first child. By and large my experience of parenting of Maddison was relatively smooth. Maddison had reflux but responded well to strategies I used. When she was five months old I admitted us to a Mother and Baby in-patient facility following a period of extended sleep deprivation. The three week stay was successful in helping me and Maddison manage our sleep and also in making some connections with other new mums (one of whom is still a close friend of mine).

When Maddison was two and I was 34, I fell pregnant again. We had planned the pregnancy but from the moment it was confirmed I felt conflicted and wondered if we had made the right decision.

Confident in my ability to parent a girl, I desperately hoped that this child would be a girl.

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I remember when Jake was born; on waking up the morning after giving birth to Maddison I was so excited, but with Jake it was different. I couldn't face the day and felt like pulling the blankets over my head. Jake was such a different child to Maddison – everything that worked for Maddison didn't work for Jake. He didn't sleep at night, struggled with feeding and had dreadful reflux. He had (and still does!) a very strong personality. I regularly attended the Maternal and Child Health Clinic and they were happy with Jake's progress. During this time I'd say I was functioning but not coping. I was robotic and just going through the motions.

Mum would help by coming over every day and looking after Maddison, but I could see the toll it was taking on her. Wayne had taken time off work and was a great help, but after a few weeks his boss said if he did not come back he would no longer have a job. When Jake was five weeks old I was with him at the local shopping centre. I remember having just fed him, he drank his bottle with great relish and as soon as he finished he started screaming. I could not console him. A woman strolled by and casually commented "someone's hungry!" That flyaway comment triggered an overwhelming feeling of anxiety that must have been simmering for, who knows, how long.

That afternoon upon returning home the first thing I did was telephone the Mother and Baby in-patient facility in which I had previously been admitted. Upon hearing my story they said they had a bed available for me pending a GP referral.

I went to the local Medical Clinic and saw a GP. She didn't know about the Unit but made a referral anyway. Jake and I were admitted to the Mother and Baby in-patient facility the next morning where we remained for the next three weeks.

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Case study Stacey: Perinatal Mental Health 07.13