

POST PARTUM DEPRESSION: Living In Hell

By Sandi McCreight, copyright, 2002

The days after my second child, daughter Kayla's birth, were exhilarating, exhausting, and filled with joy, until the visions started.

I didn't tell anyone at first. How could I? How could I explain the inexplicable, the fatigue, sorrow, and horrific visions of death and mayhem that consumed me, day after day? Certainly, if anyone learned the truth about my bizarre, dark visions, my children would be taken away, and I condemned as an unfit mother, a danger to her children, a woman losing touch with reality.

It had started out so subtly. Kayla was born July 26, 2001, a healthy eight pounds, ten ounces, despite arriving two weeks early. My pregnancy had been complicated with excess water retention and extreme discomfort but no life threatening problems. I had baby blues with my first daughter Mandy, two ten-minute crying jags, but no signs of postpartum depression. There

were no indications that I was about to sink into a living nightmare where my comfortable, loving, fulfilled life would cease as I knew it.

A few weeks following Kayla's birth, a friend, noticing my despondency, gently nudged me to seek medical help. I contacted my Doctor and started on antidepressants with some immediate improvement. Then, after witnessing the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Towers, I began to have visions. The horror of watching the attacks, compounded by my fragile emotional state, triggered violent visions, like mini-movies, complete with 3-D imaging, visions so real, they terrified me: *My precious daughters lay on our lawn under a black sky raining chemical warfare that rots my babies' tender skin from their bones, while I stand by, helpless. I see my mother, in bed with my eldest daughter, Mandy. Suddenly, my mother gasps, and falls from the bed, dead.*

A few weeks later at a piano lesson for Mandy, while attempting a quick exit without causing too much commotion, I put Kayla in her car seat, lifted it and moved out of the circle of students. Suddenly the car seat is too light. I look down. Kayla is face down on the floor, not moving. The handle hadn't locked properly and the seat tipped dumping my precious baby on the concrete floor, rendering her unconscious.

Horrified, I scoop her up, and am instantly rewarded with her shrill shrieks of pain and terror. I drive to the medical clinic, where, so overwhelmed with guilt and shame, I vomit and faint. Kayla and I are sent to a hospital thirty minutes away where Kayla is admitted to the Pediatric ward to undergo further testing, including an MRI to determine she has no permanent injuries. Her face is so swollen, she can't nurse for three days. I am tormented by guilt, and uneasy holding my baby. What if I drop her?

Kayla and I return home after three days in the hospital, and the visions grow more violent. They involve Kayla in a variety of accidents: falling down a volcano where I can't reach her, falling from my arms into a cook pot and suffering ghastly burns, or to the floor where the cook pot and its boiling contents cascade on to her tiny body. I tell no one. I am convinced I'm abnormal, maybe losing my mind. Would people think I wanted to do what I saw in my visions? I desperately need help, but am too afraid to admit it. What if my children are taken away?

Fortunately, my local health nurse is persistent in questioning my state of mind. I finally confess my horrifying secret. That afternoon, a nurse and psychiatrist assess me at the local Mental Health Unit. I'm not psychotic.

I'm suffering severe Postpartum Depression. Two days later, I suffer a complete breakdown.

I manage to keep it together until my husband, Brian, comes home from work, then I begin to cry uncontrollably, and faint. When I come to, I know I need help. I call my doctor who arranges my admission to the hospital Psychiatric Ward where I remain as a voluntary patient for eight days. Kayla is upstairs in the pediatric ward and I have unlimited visitation. I start the slow process of healing.

Over the next eight days, I learn a lot; about me, about mental illness, and about the wealth of help available to those who ask. I learn I need to forgive myself for Kayla's fall. "It's a freak accident," one nurse assures me. I am made to write on paper that Kayla's fall was an "accident", not "deliberate". It is hard to convince myself of this, but I try. The most important thing I learn, is that the mind, like the body, needs rest, and treatment, when it's ill. I have to learn to give myself permission to rest without feeling guilty. I am asked to write out a list of things I feel guilty about. The list is endless. One of the more innocuous things I'm guilty about is the laundry. It's never done, and I'm always making excuses for the growing pile of dirty clothes in the basement. My psychiatrist suggests my reluctance to tackle the laundry

is related to the vision I have of tripping while going down the stairs with Kayla in my arms, falling, and landing on her fragile body, crushing her into a bloody, broken mess. I'm not lazy. I'm scared, and doing my best to protect my daughter, without realizing it.

I leave the hospital full of hope, but scarcely two weeks later, I'm confronted by my public health nurse, husband, and treatment team: I haven't changed a thing. I'm still not resting. I'm still not taking care of myself. I've lost seventy pounds in four months. The visions and nightmares continue. I plunge deeper into hell.

A few weeks pass, and after a long day of uncontrollable crying, I call my health nurse. She contacts my doctor. They decide another trip to the psychiatric ward is not productive, but arrangements are made for the girls and me to move in with my husband's brother and family. I need support and help with my girls around the clock.

The days pass, some good, some bad, most filled with feelings of confusion, and disassociation. Sometimes I don't know what day it is. I'm tired. I want to crawl under a rock. I focus on my family, and try to carry on.

I am down by seventy-five pounds now. I have no desire to eat, or drink, but I'm still nursing Kayla and know I must take care of myself. I must be reminded to eat and drink. I am dizzy, shaky, and suffer headaches and

muscle cramps. I undergo a series of medical tests that determine my physical ailments are caused by poor nutrition. I'm shocked. Why can't I get control of my mind, body, and emotions?

I spend a weekend at home with my husband, but I feel like I don't fit in. I feel guilty about not wanting to be there, and even guiltier at the relief I feel to return to my surrogate family. My support team suggests I need time away from my children. I enroll them in daycare, and suffer more guilt when they're away. It takes a long time, and a lot of patient encouragement from my health professionals for me to feel okay about having time to myself. I'm still learning how to let go of the guilt.

By Valentine's Day, I've lost eighty pounds. I weigh less than I did before I got pregnant, but for the most part, I remember to eat or drink without being reminded. Occasionally I forget what day it is, but I'm finally able to concentrate and figure it out on my own. It feels so good to feel like my old self again, sometimes.

Though the weeks are long and the accomplishments, small, even I am noticing the improvements. I go home occasionally, and have gotten to the point where I can go alone, and feel comfortable and safe. No fears. No anxiety. I look forward to going home, and after ten weeks living with my brother-in-law's family, the girls and I finally do.

The road to recovery is full of bumps and potholes. My first day home I suffer another terrifying vision. At first, I hang on to it, but when I finally share it with Brian, I realize the vision was probably a result of the stress of returning home to the scene of my "failure". But I know now, I'm not a failure.

My health is still poor, but I've gained a pound—a significant achievement after months of continuous loss. I'm on the road to recovery, but must remember to keep my expectations of myself realistic. I'm not Super Mom, as one psychiatrist told me, and must now plan my day by making a small, realistic list of things to do. I can no longer push myself to the point of exhaustion, and must learn to accept, and more importantly, ask for help, when it's needed.

I am learning to let go of many things, and Brian is learning to catch what I let go of. He has been incredible through all of this. He has provided amazing support to me, and this journey has strengthened our bond and love for each other. As I come to terms with the severity of my illness, and share it with my family and friends, I am surprised to hear that they have no idea how truly sick I've been. And yet, their support and source of constant strength, is what has kept me going.

Postpartum depression is a serious "medical" illness, but, as I've discovered, it's treatable, but only if the sufferer reaches out for help. My recovery would not have happened without the help of my team of medical and mental health professionals, and the unconditional love and support of my husband, his family and mine, and my friends.

A special heartfelt thank you goes to Leslie, Diane, and Carrie, whose support lifted me up and carried me through. To my husband, Brian, for holding on tight, and to our incredible families for their love. I am indebted to everyone who helped me climb out of the dark well of depression brought on by a chemical imbalance in my body, and my own desire to do everything "right" after the birth of my second child, and hope that anyone who reads my story, and recognizes symptoms in themselves, or in someone else, will run, not walk, to the nearest medical, or mental health practitioner, and seek the help needed. Take this story with you, if you can't find the words to explain what you need.

The help is there, if you ask for it. You are not alone.