

Post-Partum Depression – How It Was!

Post-partum depression, which sometimes occurs after childbirth, is a common condition that can be easily treated. It is my hope that education has helped to reduce the stigma which once was attached to this illness. Post-partum depression was almost never discussed if one was experiencing the symptoms. It was considered a mental illness and a person was said to have taken a nervous breakdown. The medical profession had various ideas as to the cause, and treatment was inadequate. Hormone changes after childbirth was not even considered. I researched a 1979 edition of World Book Encyclopedia and could not find the condition listed anywhere.

My story is about my birth and what happened to my mother as a result of post-partum depression sixty-eight years ago. I will begin by telling you that my mother was a beautiful woman, the oldest in a family of four girls and two boys born to a middle class family. My grandparents owned a farm and my grandfather was a butcher. The farm was their only source of income. My mother, being the oldest, was unable to get a post-secondary education because it was expected that she would stay at home and help with the children and chores. Two of her sisters became nurses. However, she took a seamstress course by correspondence and made all her own clothes, even her wedding dress and hat. She also made matching outfits for herself and me when I was little. She was very talented and taught herself to knit, crochet, do needlepoint, quilting, smocking, and much more. She entered many items at the Chatham Exhibition and received 1st prize ribbons for them. She loved to cook and took great pride in her home. She was a very outgoing person and everyone loved her.

My parents were married when my mother was twenty-six years old. I was born in 1943. They were very happy as portrayed by the many pictures taken by my mother. I have a baby book where my mother entered everything including birth date and time, weight, length, visitors, gifts, first smile, first tooth, first words, first steps, first birthday; and then everything changed. The details are unknown to me because it was not something discussed by my father, grandparents or anyone else in my presence and even

when I was older I never asked, but facts presented themselves to me which gave me some insight as to what happened. My mother had a birthday party for my first birthday and then, shortly afterward, everything in our lives changed.

All the entries in my baby book stopped, as did the pictures, until I was two years old. She was diagnosed as having taken a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized. She was sent from the Miramichi Hospital in Newcastle to the Saint John County Hospital, a mental institution. I am not aware of her treatments except to know that they included electric shock treatment. Due to the fact that I have many pictures beginning at my second birthday, I assume that she was hospitalized for approximately one year. Then everything seemed to go on as before until she became pregnant with her second child. It is my understanding that the doctors thought her illness was the result of childbirth and told her she should not have any more children. However, she wanted another child and six years later my sister was born. My mother bought me a new doll to play with while she was away having her baby. I was six years old and my mother never returned home. I never saw my mother again until my father brought her home from the hospital in Saint John for a visit.

The visit is not very clear in my memory because it was probably only a few months after her admittance but I vividly remember when it came time for her to go back. She did not want to leave and my father had to get someone to help him put her in the vehicle. I can still hear her calling my name. That was the last time I saw my mother until my father and I went to the Saint John Hospital to visit her. I was ten years old. Dad had not wanted to take me to visit because visits were such a traumatic experience for him that he did not know what affect the visit would have on me.. Upon my father's return from visiting with mom, I recall him standing behind the wood stove talking to her parents and crying. The visits had a profound affect on him and he once said that he didn't know if he could go back again. Finally, I convinced my father to take me to visit. When we went in, he told me not to look around and to follow him closely. We were taken to a room which resembled a jail cell. It was long and narrow with bars on a window which was close to the ceiling. The only thing in the room was a single bed. I

remembered mom from pictures she had taken and expected her to look the same, but she had endured so much in those eight years it was like seeing a stranger in her place. The mother I had pictured seemed to be gone and I remember being very surprised, disappointed and sad. She could not believe that I had grown so much and she asked me to turn around and around so she could look at me. That visit was not what I expected, even though I really don't know what I expected.

My father and I lived with his parents and my sister went from the hospital to live with my mom's parents. I grew up always wishing my mother was well and missing her. I prayed every night that she would get well and come home. My father truly loved me and I knew that but he was not an affectionate person and neither were my grandparents. They were all very good to me and I was well provided for but nothing can replace a mother's love and I missed that. My father made sure that my sister and I spent time together. Every weekend we would go to my other grandparents' home and visit with them and my sister, and I would spend every summer vacation there. When my sister was six years old, our grandparents sold the farm and moved to Ontario with their daughter. They wanted to take my sister with them but my father could not let that happen and so she came to live with my father, his parents and me.

Eventually, my mother was transferred from the Saint John County Hospital to the Campbellton Mental Hospital. This meant that visits were more frequent but they did not fill the void in my heart. Dad had to sell our home which was sitting vacant. My father loved me and was very proud of me. He always took me to the Exhibition and won dolls for me at the games. He took me shopping at Rubenstein's Clothing Store in Chatham. My grandparents gave us a good home and did their very best but a mother's love cannot be replaced and I still had that void in my heart. As a teenager I did everything that was expected of me, but I did not have that closeness and love that only a mother can provide and for which I longed. Finally, when I was fourteen years old, mom came home to stay. I was sooo happy. My prayers had been answered. Remember, I had been praying for eight years. My grandmother had given me a great foundation in faith. We rented a house and we were a family once again. However, it was not what I

expected. My mother was well enough to come home but not totally well. The years had taken their toll on my father. He was doing what was expected, but looking back, the love he once had for my mother was changed. He was a good provider and, as always, he loved his children; but, he had changed and he seemed sad. The mother-daughter role had also changed and I was slowly becoming the mother figure in the household. That hole in my heart was even bigger. My sister, however, being only eight years old, did not experience the same emotional turmoil.

When I was fifteen years old, I became friends with the man I would marry. God had sent me an angel. He provided me with the affection and love for which I had always longed. We were friends all through my high school years, became engaged the year I graduated and married a year later. The hole in my heart had been mended. However, my heartache was not over. My father was from the old school and fifty years ago, in his view and many others, there was no equality between French and English and Catholic and Protestant. Because my husband to be was French and Catholic, my father overlooked the love we had for each other and disagreed with the marriage. Therefore, my mother, having no say in the matter, even though she wanted to, was unable to be at our wedding.

Two years after our marriage, we decided to have a family. Now I was faced with another dilemma. Knowing that my mother's illness had possibly been caused by childbirth, I wondered if I would experience the same thing as my mother. All through my pregnancy, I secretly worried, because even twenty-one years later this was something not discussed with anyone. However, my prayers were answered again. Everything went fine and our hearts were overflowing with love for our new daughter. Two years later and another pregnancy...again, I worried. This birth was more difficult emotionally. Being partially sedated, I experienced a conversation with someone in Heaven who told me that there was something my husband must do. If he failed to do as directed, I would have a nervous breakdown. This dream, or whatever it was, had a real affect on me emotionally. After bringing the baby home I became very anxious and bothered to the point of being ill every time the baby woke for a feeding. I had lost a lot

of weight and not knowing that I was experiencing post-partum depression, I realized that whatever was wrong with me was emotional and I went to my doctor. He prescribed medication and in no time I was back to my usual self. The birth of my third child was uneventful even though I still worried throughout my pregnancy.

Years went by and we had a wonderful life with our three children. We had our ups and downs as any family does, but we had a home filled with love which is the most important ingredient in any happy life. Our children grew up and married and eventually decided to have families. Every time one of the girls was expecting, I had the same familiar fear. What would childbirth cause? Again, God was good and my prayers were answered. We now have five wonderful grandchildren and everyone is well and happy.

My sister and I never discussed our anxieties with regard to this fear so I was not aware until much later in our lives that, to a certain extent, she had the same fears. Having experienced severe brain damage as the result of an attack, she was hospitalized for the best part of a year. She had to start at the beginning to learn to speak, walk, etc. etc. She had no recollection of her attack. Months into her recovery, she became very agitated and wanted to talk to me. When I got to the hospital, she asked me what had happened to her. I proceeded to tell her the story of her attack not knowing what reaction to expect. When I had finished, she began to cry and with relief in her voice, she told me that she had thought she had taken a nervous breakdown. I then knew that she had carried that same fear with her throughout her adult life. She now has a daughter and a son and six grandchildren. She is now living a very normal, happy life except for a few disabilities as a result of her brain injury. However, this does not interfere with her quality of life.

Our parents are now both deceased. After having been institutionalized several more times during her life, my mother lived out her life at home and had as good a life as could be expected having been a victim of the times in which she lived. She got to attend her second daughter's wedding and met her five grandchildren. However, she was unable to provide a mother's support when her grandchildren were born. She passed

away at 61 years of age as the result of a stroke. I am confident that my mother has a special place in heaven since she experienced hell here on earth. Had she lived in a different age, everything could have been so different; not only for her, but for her husband and children.

When I was asked if I would be interested in telling my story, I had mixed feelings and hesitated. The emotional scars are very real and I shed many tears during my writing. This illness affects not only the mother, but her family feels the effects as well. However, I want mothers of today to realize that what my mother and her family experienced would never happen today. Even though it definitely does make a difference in your life, thanks to technology, public awareness and the knowledge and treatment provided to mothers at the present time, it is not life changing. Post-partum depression **does** happen and it **can** happen to **anyone**. It can also be diagnosed and treated, is very common and should be viewed as such. The key is to talk about how you feel, seek medical help and know that this is only a temporary illness which does not make you less of a person.

Hopefully, the stigma which was attached to this condition has long since vanished. If not, then all the progress the medical profession has made with regard to diagnosis and treatment is at a huge disadvantage. Education and awareness are key in combating this illness from which many women suffer. Removing the stigma is the first step and a very important one.

If my story has enlightened even one person and made a positive difference, then I feel that my family's suffering has not been in vain.

Paula