YOU CAN'T ALWAYS TELL BY LOOKING

I still find it hard to comprehend that the birth of our gorgeous, much wanted and much loved baby girl pre-empted the most terrifying and debilitating illness of my life involving a rapid decline of mind, body and spirit that left me barely able to function, let alone care for our daughter.

Although I became very overwhelmed by emotion when watching the birth video with my husband at our pre-natal class, I dismissed the small segment on depression because that was something that had little relevance to me or my husband. As a lawyer, my mind had always been strong. I'd always been a reasonably high achiever. Depression was simply not on my agenda.

Three and a half years later and with the benefit of hindsight, I now realise that I had many risk factors, that anxiety and depression had actually been skirting around the edges of my life for a very long time and that the stressful life event of giving birth combined with exhaustion, hormone changes, sleep deprivation and the overwhelming responsibility of caring for a newborn were simply catalysts for an episode of major depressive illness that might have occurred at any highly stressful time in my life.

I think it is fair to say that genetic vulnerability lit the match and stressful life events started the fire.

The fear I once had of childbirth now seems inconsequential. Giving birth was the easy part! Twelve hours of natural labour was exhausting but quickly over and my husband and I had a beautiful baby to show for it.

The pain of depression however has been the most profound and enduring form of suffering I have ever experienced.

It has certainly been the most challenging thing I have ever confronted and tested my patience and perseverance beyond measure.

Having said that, the experience has not all been bad. It has provided an opportunity to learn many things about myself and others, to make new friends along the way and I have also experienced great joy through the love and support of my husband, our daughter and family and friends. Sometimes support has come from unexpected quarters.

I have also gained insight and empathy and a passion for promoting awareness of, understanding and compassionate response to a health issue that has had a significant impact on my life and the life of many others.

I have learnt that the causes of depression can be complex and multi-tiered and that wisdom, time and discernment are usually needed to gain a proper diagnosis and treatment.

I have also learnt that depression is a spectrum illness, the symptoms and duration can vary in severity from mild to severe and that despite the term "mental illness", depression can be biological or physical in nature, involving changes to the chemical make up of the brain and producing very physical symptoms.

It is my hope that by setting out the symptoms of my depression and some of the things that have helped me on my journey of recovery, I will be able to help someone, anyone, who might also be suffering.

SYMPTOMS

1. Insomnia

I had problems sleeping immediately after I gave birth in hospital (and probably had about 3 or 4 hours per night while there) but put it down to the adrenalin and excitement associated with giving birth and being in a strange place and having to breastfeed etc.
I had bad baby blues when I left the hospital on day 5 and remember the nurse saying "lower your expectations".
Sleep improved upon return home (apart from first couple of days when our daughter was very unsettled and we were up most of the night) and I was averaging about 5 hours a night and thinking I was coping quite well until about week 8 when I felt very stressed and pressured to travel about 4 hours for a weekend to visit my husband's parents.
I reluctantly went as I didn't want to disappoint them.
It was a very difficult weekend. There was a very noisy triathlon with fireworks going on all day and at night so we had very interrupted sleep, I got sick with a cough and remember waking up during the night with rapid heartbeat thinking "why is my heart racing?".
By the end of the weekend I told my husband that I felt the weekend had really taken it out of me emotionally and physically and as we drove home I felt incredibly physically unwell and very overwhelmed and unable to cope.
Upon arrival home I managed to sleep a few hours but between weeks 8 and 13 (when I was hospitalized in a mother and baby unit in a psychiatric hospital) my sleep deteriorated from about 4 to 5 hours per night down to 2 hours down to nothing.
Our daughter by this stage was actually sleeping quite well although she was a very difficult baby to settle in that she required a lot of pram pushing and bassinette pushing.
In the 2 weeks prior to hospitalization, I had minimal sleep although I desperately tried to sleep by listening to relaxing tapes and taking sleeping medication that had little effect.
It was very distressing being unable to sleep while my baby slept.
One night I spent the whole night lying on the bed awake with the obsessive intrusive thought "I'm going to hell" going over and over in my mind.
When I did sleep I had nightmares and when I didn't sleep I had rapid heartbeat, intrusive thoughts, racing thoughts.
I became obsessed about my inability to sleep and this obsessive fear persisted for a very long time. Even now, 3 years later, sleep disturbances still have the capacity to kick start anxiety and depression.

I now understand why sleep deprivation is a form of torture.
Somehow I managed to persist in breastfeeding my daughter during this time – up to 10 times a day. It was the only thing I was capable of doing well.
Periods of insomnia still accompany episodes of depression but are helped significantly by an antidepressant, mood stabilizer and sleeping tablets when necessary.

2. Anxiety

In hindsight the anxiety started early, as I bled reasonably heavily for about 6 weeks, more so when I breastfed and I recall being anxious about that ("why am I bleeding so much, is there something wrong with me?") and nervous about breastfeeding in public.
Around week 5 or 6 I recall being quite stressed about the possibility of getting mastitis and one day while my husband was out I started pacing around our unit, thinking I had a fever and mastitis and really freaking out. In hindsight, this was a panic attack.
The anxiety then became anxiety about my lack of sleep, our daughter's health (she did get bronchiolitis and was hospitalized briefly at week 9), anxiety about my own health (the cough I had persisted) and of course anxiety about the depression/anxiety itself!
I was always thinking ahead and thinking the worst "I'm going to die", "I'm going to hell", "I have to go to the mental hospital", "I'm going to be sick forever". I still have a tendency to catastrophize (overestimate the likelihood of a negative outcome and underestimate my ability to cope in the event that the negative outcome occurred) however I am now keenly aware of the negative self-talk and try to combat it by challenging my thoughts with more realistic thoughts.
The physical symptoms of anxiety became so intense that I had rapid heartbeat 24 hours a day (my general practitioner put me a beta blocker which didn't work) and when I started Zoloft I had chest pains and nausea and gagging.
Other symptoms of anxiety included racing thoughts, insomnia, sweating a lot, flushing, shaking, shivering, sore muscles, a constant feeling of adrenalin coursing through my body, a feeling of my body "buzzing" as though it was filled with electricity and a sense of being extremely on edge.
A lot of the time I really just wanted to be knocked out to sleep and stop the suffering.
In hindsight I'd say I have a history of anxiety, social anxiety and "flushing" easily when stressed or embarrassed but never to this extent.
At times when I was unable to sleep I would pace around the house with negative self talk, look up the internet about depression etc.
When I weaned off medication and fell pregnant again last year, I experienced insomnia and anxiety again.

3. Obsessive intrusive thoughts

I experience recurrent distressing thoughts that I felt unable to control that repeatedly bombarded me and caused me great anxiety.
For example "I have to go to the mental hospital" over and over like a broken record in my brain.
At church one day I broke down as I couldn't stand the obsessive thoughts.

The pastor's wife and friend called the mental health crisis team and they then called me everyday for about 2 weeks prior to hospitalization.
After I returned home from hospital I kept having the intrusive thought that I would have to go back to hospital and be separated from my daughter and husband and never get better and be stuck in hospital forever.
I would also ruminate obsessively about sleep, our baby's sleep patterns, my health, depression and other health issues.
The recurrent distressing thoughts have stopped however I still have the compulsive habit of scratching my head, which has existed since my first miscarriage (and prior to that I had a habit of picking my face which has since ceased) and to some extent being obsessed about having post natal depression and researching it.
As a lawyer, I have always had a tendency to be focussed or obsessive but never to this extent.
When I was a child I hoarded food in my school bag and later cupboard – to the extent that there were piles of rotting sandwiches in them – hiding them from my mother who always said that she would know if I threw them in the bin at school.

4. Chronic Fatigue

Prior to hospitalization I would alternate between feeling "hyper alert" and then "comatose/zombie like". At one stage I was so exhausted that my cognitive abilities and concentration were so severely impaired that I couldn't perform basic tasks like make a bottle of formula or make a meal – everything became too hard – I would walk around the house putting things back in the same place - I really couldn't function. Prior to hospitalization all I could really do well was breastfeed.
My concentration/ability to focus was severely impaired – I was unable to read, watch television – I just couldn't take anything in.
Following my last miscarriage in 2007, I also experienced severe fatigue and various aches and pains (I had ultrasound on my stomach at one point – of course there was nothing physically wrong) and had I not been familiar with the symptoms of depression and anxiety, I might have thought that I was experiencing chronic fatigue syndrome or some other similar ailment.

5. Irritability

I am usually fairly calm and able to control my emotions (I once won a work award for "never spitting the dummy"!) however I experienced extreme anger when I perceived that my husband wasn't listening to my concerns about going to visit his parents when our daughter was 5 weeks old. I felt very pressured and remember screaming at him "you are not listening!" and jumping out of our car at traffic lights about 2 minutes away from home and running down the street crying – I felt that I had no control over myself and kept thinking "I haven't felt this way since I was a teenager".
I still experience some bad anger episodes during which I think and say and do things that I normally wouldn't dream of doing and I look back and think "what was I thinking?" I now know that irritability and anger can be symptoms of a mood disorder.

6. Crying

A lot of the time.

7. Thoughts of Death

When very depressed, I did think about death and told my husband that I didn't think I could go on however this was more in the context of wanting to end the suffering of the depression and wanting to be knocked out and wake up from the nightmare.

OTHER SYMPTOMS

- lack of appetite when severely depressed then overeating for comfort
- loss of libido
- trouble concentrating/focussing
- feeling "foggy" or "hung over"
- feeling of self-loathing when very ill
- feeling of great apprehension in my stomach when my daughter cried
- feeling I had to do everything quickly to keep up with my baby
- feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities
- micro managing everything
- thinking people were judging me and judging myself
- thinking my mother-in-law wanted to take my daughter away from me when very ill
- raving on and on about my condition and feeling unable to stop myself
- feeling that I was screaming out for help but that no one was listening – I would tell people I was depressed and they would say that they couldn't tell, I looked like I was coping well
- being rigid and inflexible when it came to routines – getting stressed when routine was not followed, for example thinking our daughter wouldn't sleep at night if we in any way deviated from her normal routine
- feeling as though normal emotions were magnified 100%
- feeling guilt about different things – thinking I was no longer a Christian and being punished
- loss of interest in anything pleasurable
- finding things "too hard" – simply tasks like shopping and making a meal became overwhelming, let alone going out with our daughter or going away
- difficulty in coping with changes such as sleep patterns, bottle feeding, solids, walking
- lack of motivation and energy
- feeling totally out of control and a prisoner of my mind and body
- feeling incapable of looking after my daughter

- being pre-occupied when depression started with thought of death and wondering whether my father (who died before I turned 2) had gone to heaven
- saying things out of character for me – for example I told my first psychiatrist (whom I'd met twice), outside a lift at her work "I've been thinking about my relationship with God" – very out of character for me to say something like this to a virtual stranger in a public place
- difficulty making decisions
- negative self talk – when I had a cough, I kept thinking I was going to die
- ruminating about negative things and perceiving everything in a negative light – thinking about my own childhood and the depression my mother suffered
- being overly sensitive to the pain of others
- sensitive to any perceived threat or criticism
- sensitive to noise, smell, touch – for example, jumping when the telephone rang
- racing thoughts and speaking quickly
- speaking quickly and raving on about my condition
- feeling disinterested/estranged to my daughter and then at other times being overly concerned about her
- feeling that I was not good enough as a mother and incapable of looking after my daughter – when I was hospitalized the doctor kept telling me that a “good enough” mother is “good enough”
- fear of being alone – wanting my husband to stay home
- social phobia, blushing and flushing
- pacing around, cleaning up
- inability to hold thoughts
- cold hands
- aches and pains in neck, stomach, arms

RELEVANT HISTORY

In hindsight I definitely suffered from depression and anxiety following a miscarriage I suffered in late 2002. I was almost 12 weeks pregnant when this miscarriage occurred and had to have an emergency “d and c” which was a very stressful time.

Prior to 2002 I had experienced relatively good health although was hit by a motor bike when crossing the road in 1995 and sustained a head injury and concussion and bruising. In 2001 I had a cyst that burst on my ovary which was fairly stressful and later that year I sustained a tear in my left hip flexor which took over 18 months of physiotherapy and exercise to heal.

The depression and anxiety I experienced following the first miscarriage was untreated as I didn’t recognise it for what it was and my focus was on another condition namely vulvadynia, which started after the miscarriage and took 12 months of treatment by oestrogen therapy and biofeedback to resolve.

My mother has a very long history of depression/anxiety/eating disorder and was diagnosed with bipolar by a doctor many years ago however she refused to accept that diagnosis or treatment and left hospital after that diagnosis had been made. My mother has a cousin with bipolar who takes lithium.

I had another miscarriage in 2007 and experienced high anxiety symptoms for a couple of weeks followed by heavy fatigue and fogginess and lots of aches and pains, particularly in my stomach however an ultrasound showed everything was normal and I re-commenced my antidepressant (I had ceased taking it in early 2007 to get pregnant)

RISK FACTORS FOR DEPRESSION (AS I PERCEIVE THEM)

- Family history on maternal side of depression and anxiety, including bipolar
- Death of my father in a plane accident when I was a baby (almost 2 years of age) and grief associated with loss of that relationship
- Complicated relationship with a mother who has suffered long term depression/anxiety/chronic fatigue and was unable to support my diagnosis or treatment when I first became ill and refuses to recognise her own illness
- An analytical mind and a tendency to ruminate
- Sensitivity
- Long term history of anxiety/social anxiety and obsessive tendencies
- Need for control/perfectionism
- Tendency to internalize emotions and present a front – not encouraged to express feelings or be myself in family of origin
- A husband with long term low mood (but very supportive otherwise)
- Grief from miscarriages
- A series of stressful events during pregnancy and leading up to my hospitalization including the stillbirth of a friends baby when I was 3 months pregnant; witnessing a pedestrian being hit by a car when I was 7 months pregnant; death of a close friend's father to cancer shortly after my daughter was born;
- History of PMT with insomnia and mood swings
- Hormonal issues following the first miscarriage
- Sleep deprivation
- Colicky baby
- Lack of family support due to geographical distance and lack of siblings (my parents have only seen my daughter once since she was born); my mother in law has been very supportive however she also lives some distance away and has had her own health issues, recently having stomach cancer
- Instability concerning our housing arrangements
- A job involving emotional/relationship issues with people in crisis – family law

MEDICATIONS

The ones that didn't help

Betaloc – Betablocker for rapid heartbeat – not helpful

Zoloft – Antidepressant – allergic (hives)

Prothiaden – Antidepressant – ineffective

Temazapam – sleeping tablet – ineffective

The ones that did help

Zyprexa – Olanzapine – Mood stabilizer/antipsychotic – Initially on 5 mg in hospital then 2.5 mg for a year after; recently resumed following a manic episode

Avanza – Mirtazapine – Antidepressant – Was on 30 mg now on 45 mg – good for anxiety and depression

Stilnox – Sleeping tablet – Good – still use when necessary

Ativan – Lorazipam – Prescribed for anxiety but I haven't taken it

I also use rescue remedy and take fish oil capsules and B vitamins

SOME BACKGROUND ABOUT MY MUM, TAKEN FROM A BOOK SHE WROTE (THE PARTS TAKEN FROM HER BOOK APPEAR IN QUOTATION MARKS)

Fraternal twin - brother died shortly after birth
Attacked by a neighbour as a child - he attempted to rape her - she was okay but emotionally scarred
Tried to commit suicide as teenager - head in oven
Husband died after 2 years of marriage at the age of 26 in a plane accident (he was a naviagator in the air force)
Mother severely depressed after that - "I did many irrational and dangerous things" - bulimia - numerous relationships with men - insomnia - tranquilizers and laxatives - met my step father when I was 4 - he had marital difficulties - mother became pregnant to him then terminated - then her father died - step father undecided about leaving his wife - then they married - mother won dress making competition - moved to Qld when I was 11 for health reasons – then mother got osteo myelitis in her big toe -

"Marianne continued to do well at school but teenage tensions began to surface as she and I clashed - I screamed, she screamed and we both hit. Not a time I remember with pride.
Having been dosed with prescribed anti depressants, sleeping pills and calming drugs since Jacques' death, I once again sought aid from a psychiatrist to solve my sleeping problems. For many years he counselled me kindly, listened and provided a shoulder upon which to cry but the pills continued. I tried everything to gain peace and relaxation for my tenseness. Yoga, meditation, deep breathing, hypnosis, psychology"

Started painting - then landscaping - dinner parties - sewing

"Determined to escape the bondage of those interminable pills I sought help from another psychiatrist. Highly emotional at that time, due to family problems outside our immediate family unit, provided him with a highly excitable, weepy, depressed mess. He recommended a stay in a psychiatric hospital for support, during removal of the drugs. With mixed feelings I entered. Glad at the prospect of being rid of the crutch but sad because it seemed I was unable to knock the habit without assistance. Dosage was quickly cut, withdrawal symptoms increased my nervous state. Sleep evaded me, adding to the problem...Weight fell from me...My new psychiatrist confronted Peter and me with his rapidly made diagnosis. Manic depressive - treatment to be lithium carbonate."
Having seen the other patients drugged up and having seen another 2 psychiatrists, neither having diagnosed manic depression, they left the hospital...

Then water fast - nearly died - suicidal

"Then it happened! Crash! Suddenly my life was reversed. From great activity and insomnia to one of almost permanent sleep...weight dropped, arms ached, memory diminished, confused and depressed..The doctor believed I was nearing a total breakdown...Either as a mental or physical breakdown. It was to be a physical breakdown. Fluctuating now between non stop sleep and insomnia I returned to the dreaded anti depressants and sleeping pills..."

Then sold house in Rochedale - met a Christian friend - became a Christian - depression lifted! "My lifetime negativity vanished as did my deep depression. Although still physically very ill with an immune system in almost total collapse...my new doctor's diagnosis of ME or chronic fatigue syndrome was treated with diet etc...The strange pattern of remission and regression frustrated and disappointed me but gradually I began to accept God's timing for my healing would be the right time...no more high heels, no television, no modern furnishings, no perms, natural lifestyle..

"Marianne has seen me change from a highly volatile, hyperactive and screaming mother to the reverse..."

I am not sure when my mother ceased taking antidepressants however she commenced taking Avanza (the same medication I take) in June 2007 – after efforts from myself, my

step-father and her general practitioner) She also takes medications for anxiety and many other medications and vitamins.

CONCERNS ABOUT ANOTHER BABY

My husband and I would love to have another baby however I still have a number of concerns about my ability to cope and I have listed these below:

*age (40) and risks associated with same/feeling more tired
*medication risks during pregnancy (there are no long term studies with avanza)
*risk of worsening condition when recovery is partial rather than complete
*possible need to increase medication/use other medications during pregnancy
*lack of family support and diminished support from mother-in-law due to her health issues
*husband has depression (only started being treated last year)
*sleep deprivation appears to trigger illness
*family history – biological factors – bipolar

WHAT HAS HELPED?

Depression is something I will probably need to manage for the rest of my life and I am still working on the best treatment for me.

I am aware that my own triggers seem to relate to the physical and emotional health of those closest to me and also times when I have less sleep than normal and more stress than normal.

Some of the things that have helped me in my journey are:

- Medication;
- Staying in a mother and baby unit in a psychiatric hospital with our daughter for 6 weeks to obtain support and treatment;
- Acceptance of the illness – initially I wanted to beat it without medication; then I wanted to beat it with medication; now I just want to manage it with a variety of treatments;
- Educating myself and others about the illness – websites such as The Smiling Mask and Postpartum Progress have been really helpful;
- Practical and emotional support – from friends and family who visited or made meals or cared for our daughter or took me to the doctors;
- Not assuming that everyone else who looks like they are coping are coping – many people have their own stories to tell;
- Not assuming that everyone else who suffers depression suffers it to the same extreme that I have;

- Perseverance and patience – navigating through the mental health system has not been an easy journey;
- The mental health crisis team who rang me every day for two weeks prior to hospitalization;
- Learning to say no – when I am feeling overwhelmed and things are getting too hard;
- Learning to say yes when I need to get out of my comfort zone – it is a question of balance;
- Joining a mothers group for women with PND – I made a wonderful friend through this group;
- Getting out of the house with our daughter whether it is just to the park, library, coffee shop – being with other people and in the community helps;
- Talk therapy with a trusted psychiatrist and psychologist or other non-judgmental person – sometimes it takes time to find the best one for the particular person;
- Deep breathing exercises and relaxation tapes for anxiety;
- Physical exercise on a regular basis;
- Making daily lists of achievable goals;
- Getting out of my head by focussing on 5 things that I can see, hear and feel;
- Taking time out to do things that I enjoy such as massage, shopping, movies, social activities;
- Appreciating the simple things in life – hot showers, cups of tea, nice food, quiet times with family;
- Minimizing time with energy draining people when I am feeling vulnerable – sometimes easier said than done;
- Cognitive behavioural therapy to try to change negative patterns of thinking;
- Attempting to live in the present – yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift from God that is why it is called the present;
- Faith in God and support from church members;
- The way I feel at any point in time will pass (and sometimes it changes from hour to hour);
- Limiting late nights and alcohol consumption – again it is a question of balance;
- Eating well and vitamin supplements;
- Having a routine or structure to my day;
- Working part-time and retaining an identity outside of being a mother; and
- Cultivating an attitude of gratitude;

SOME OF THE THINGS I HAVE LEARNT

- People with mental illness have potential but need a lot of support and a sense of purpose and direction and connection to others;
- Sometimes it is hard to know where personality ends and mental illness starts, it is important to remember that the illness does not define the person;
- Mental illness does not discriminate – it can affect the young, the old, the healthy, the infirm, the first time mother, the 10th time mother;

- It takes a lot of strength to care for a child and a lot more strength when one undertakes that task while also suffering from a mental illness;
- You can love your child and your family, have a good life and do all the “right things” but still suffer from depression;
- The impact of stress and sleep deprivation should never be underestimated;
- Mental health matters and needs to be taken seriously