

FINAL DRAFT

Tania's Story:

One Woman's Recovery from Postpartum Depression

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When Tania, a new mother, first held her tiny infant daughter, Katherine, three years ago, she was horrified to think, “What would happen if I threw her up against the wall? I bet she would die.” She was ashamed: moms were not supposed to think like that, she recalls in “The Smiling Mask,” a book she recently co-authored with two other women about their struggles with postpartum depression. Looking back, Tania thinks this was one of the early signs that something was not right. Over the next three years, Tania, now 33, would make the journey from postpartum depression to helping other women heal.

While the details of Tania’s story are unusual, postpartum depression is not uncommon. She suffered from postpartum psychosis, a rare form of postpartum depression (PPD). The Canadian Mental Health Association estimates postpartum psychosis affects 1 in 1000 women after they give birth. It can involve extreme fatigue, feelings of hopelessness, agitation, mood changes, and hallucinations. Tania describes her own experience as “losing touch with reality.”

The Canadian Mental Health Association estimates that up to 20% of women experience some form of PPD after giving birth. PPD differs from the tearfulness and mood changes of the “baby blues” which many women experience for a few days after delivery. PPD can begin any time between delivery and 6 months postpartum and can include feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fatigue, along with other symptoms. A woman with PPD may feel ambivalent toward her baby. PPD is a result of many factors, including changing hormone levels during and after pregnancy. Risks increase for women with previous experiences of depression and for those with complications during their pregnancies.

In Tania's story, the main factor she feels was the whole trauma of a high-risk pregnancy, life-threatening complications after delivery, and delivering a premature baby. Tania, a tall, vivacious, young professional woman living in Regina, Saskatchewan, was hospitalized 25 weeks into her first pregnancy in July, 2005, due to dangerously high blood pressure. After delivering Katherine 9 weeks early on September 8 by emergency C-section, Tania was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), where doctors normalized her blood pressure. After moving to a regular ward, Tania was once again rushed to the ICU to be monitored for stroke due to high blood pressure. During this time, Katherine, who weighed less than 3 pounds, was in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). At first, the only connection she had with Katherine was the pictures her husband, Darren, brought to her in the ICU.

Tania was finally discharged on September 15. She had been in hospital for two months. She and Darren continued to visit Katherine daily in the NICU. While Katherine's health progressed in the NICU, Tania's visits became less regular. She began to obsess about becoming a Director for Mary Kay (Tania had sold the cosmetics line part-time in addition to her full-time job) rationalizing that this could mean she could quit her full-time job to stay home with her daughter. Looking back to that time, she knows her intentions were good: she only wanted to be with her daughter.

Tania was not sleeping. She recalls feeling extremely happy at the same time. She felt as though she had little control over her thoughts and was looking for some sort of meaning in her experience. Wide-awake and pacing, she obsessed about the evils in the world eventually coming to a conclusion: fear and greed in the world would be eliminated if money had no value. She recalls visiting her Mary Kay Director at 6:30 in

the morning to share this revelation following three long, sleepless nights. That morning she also went to a local television station, planning to ask an anchorwoman to interview the Pope, who could then urge politicians to rid the world of money. The anchorwoman was not there and she left a note along with a Mary Kay book for her.

When Tania arrived home later that morning, her husband took her to the hospital immediately. After she told a psychiatrist that she wanted to heal the world, quit her full-time job to make money with Mary Kay, and had regular conversations with God, Tania was admitted to the Psychiatric Ward. While she could still visit Katherine during that time, Tania would not be released for two weeks.

It was when Katherine came home, five weeks after Tania's discharge from the Psychiatric Ward, that she realized how the experience affected her. "It sucked my self confidence as a mom," she explains. She felt incompetent and scared to be at home with Katherine. When her sister left after a ten-day stay, Tania was home alone with Katherine.

She had no energy and relied on her husband to wake her up in the morning, feed the baby in the morning and in the middle of the night, cook dinner, clean, and do the laundry when he got home from work. Tania, an attractive brunette, recalls she always took pride in her appearance; yet some days she did not even brush her teeth. Psychiatric medications contributed to her fatigue. While Tania feels she was not suicidal, she admits to having obsessive thoughts about dying: herself, her husband, and her baby. When she talks about this, her expressive face darkens a little. Reading books to her daughter helped pass the time. Visiting with friends and family helped. Mostly, she would count the hours until her husband would come home each day. It was like this for

Tania for many months through the fall and then the cold Saskatchewan winter.

A weekly routine, planned outings with family and friends, and joining a postpartum support group eventually helped her get through the depression. Tania also credits her own will power and determination as helping her get better. She coped with her feelings through prayer and by reading self-help books and the Bible. In time, she began to enjoy being with her daughter more and she finally understood what it meant to feel “bonded” to her baby. Writing in a journal, getting therapy, and eventually returning to work also helped her recover.

Postpartum depression does not just affect a woman, but also her relationships, particularly, her relationship with her spouse. When Tania talks about her husband, Darren, you can see the deep love and respect she has for him. “Lesser men would have left,” she says quite plainly. As Tania recovered, Darren seemed angry and frustrated, now that the crisis was over. Tania credits counseling with helping them focus on the good in their marriage and to heal. Katherine is now three years old and is not only meeting milestones, but “excelling.” Tania boasts with a big smile, like any proud parent.

Looking back over the past three years, Tania feels her experience with postpartum depression has changed her. She feels calmer, more spiritual, and she says: “I don’t let the little things bother me.” Tania exudes peace and openness. She describes her psychosis as a spiritual experience, a time when she “experienced joy,” and she affirms that she did indeed have an encounter with God. It was a God-inspired thought that was the impetus for the book she and two other women from her postpartum support group co-authored. “The Smiling Mask” documents their experiences and also

offers information on symptoms, resources, and support. “The Smiling Mask” will be released this fall. The title refers to the mask many women wear to cover their feelings of sadness, anger, and insecurity as new mothers. “The eyes tell a different story,” Tania explains. “Women suffer in silence. They smile and nod.”

Tania wants people to know that they need to intervene if they suspect a loved one is suffering from PPD. She hopes that sharing her story will create “awareness, understanding, and acceptance of postpartum difficulties” to help other women and their families heal. She thinks that the numbers of women who have postpartum depression are much higher than the statistics report due to the shame many women may experience; mental illness is taboo. She feels that “regardless of the numbers -- one quarter or one-fifth [of women experiencing PPD] -- anything over zero is too many.”

### **Summary Paragraph**

The story’s protagonist is Tania, a young mother. The antagonist in the story is postpartum depression. The theme of the story is the road of trials a young woman faces in dealing with postpartum depression. In the story, Tania struggles as a new mother through a difficult pregnancy and birth, life-threatening illness after childbirth, and the fear of losing a premature child. The conflict of Tania versus the illness of postpartum depression comes to a dramatic climax when she loses touch with reality and is admitted to hospital. The story chronicles the struggles she faces and her road to recovery with the love and support of her husband, family and friends, and through her own will to get better. Her story concludes with how she has grown from her experience and is helping other women through sharing her story.