

Case study: Gabrielle, parent of David (8) and Joshua (6) from NSW



Postnatal psychosis is a serious mental illness that affects one to two new mothers in every 1,000. It is a potentially life-threatening condition that nearly always requires hospitalisation. And for Wollongong mother Gabrielle, it consumed her first months of parenthood – twice.

After the birth of her first boy, Gabrielle knew she wasn't feeling right, but as a new parent learning the ropes she had no way of knowing what was normal and what was not.

"I felt my mood plummet. I became teary, felt very overwhelmed and had no confidence in myself to care for this vulnerable little human," she says.

Gabrielle's GP prescribed medication and referred her to a psychologist, but she continued to worsen. She remembers shutting down. She became a shell of her former self. She stopped talking and eating. Sometimes her thoughts were racing, at other times she just felt completely numb.

"I could barely function. Engaging in basic care for myself and my baby was impossible. I pushed my poor beloved husband away. The illness made me not want to trust him and my mind had me believing that he was doing 'bad' things behind my back and also wanted to harm the baby. I felt like an empty vessel. Unable to love. Unable to live. Everything felt bleak, black and meaningless."

"I was standing in a hurricane of my terrifying thoughts. My mind was leading me to believe outrageous and scary things. I remember believing that we were under surveillance for plotting to kill my baby. I was completely detached from reality."

Gabrielle received psychiatric assessment and treatment relatively quickly. But recovery was painfully slow. The scariest psychotic symptoms started to subside with medication, but she continued to suffer ongoing symptoms of depression and anxiety. She felt exhausted, depressed and lacked confidence in herself and her skills as a mother.

With support from friends, family and her church Gabrielle finally made it through the darkness. But it wasn't her last experience of postnatal psychosis. After a period filled with renewed hope and optimism, Gabrielle became pregnant again. This time she was sure she'd be prepared – but despite all their preparations and awareness the illness descended again. Gabrielle again experienced delusional thoughts and struggled to function. This time she ended up in a psychiatric ward.

"It was extremely frightening and I felt like a prisoner. I wasn't with my young baby and that completely tore me apart."

Gabrielle has recovered now, and looking back, she can take positives out of her experience: "Even though postnatal psychosis comes out of the blue and is scary, painful and traumatic, it is treatable and you can recover. There is hope."

Understanding the importance of reducing the stigma around mental health, Gabrielle has since collaborated on the program design of new parenting helpline, *ForWhen*, contributing insights from her own journey and ensuring that other parents have access to timely and judgment-free support when they need it most.