

A patient's story



Cathie Knox ... "I had no benchmarks for what to do when things weren't going well."

LESSONS IN LIFE

Being married to a doctor didn't prevent Cathie Knox's crushing perinatal mood disorder, after having two babies in rapid succession.

I WAS in my early 30s when I had an unplanned pregnancy. I developed pre-eclampsia at week 30, which saw me in and out of hospital for the remainder of the pregnancy. I ended up having a highly stressful labour experience, but delivered a healthy baby.

As a result of this I developed what appeared to be post-traumatic stress disorder. In order to keep myself together, I tried to focus on my eventual return to work. I loved my work in marketing, and having to take time off to have a baby had been a blow to me.

Also at this time, we had to move house and my husband had no job for a while, which was all very stressful.

When my baby was three months old, I found out I was pregnant again. I absolutely fell apart, as this was not what I had planned. My husband was only 26 and I was 32. He was a medical registrar, in training to become an obstetrician and gynaecologist, which was more than just a bit ironic.

A month after this discovery, I went back to work, but for most of the time I was back at work, I kept my second pregnancy a secret. People thought I hadn't lost the baby bulge from the first pregnancy, when I was actually well into a new one. I only had seven months back at work, though, before I had to leave to have the second baby.

This birth was straightforward, in a birth centre. But as soon as

the baby was born, I crashed, feeling immensely distressed.

Once I was back at home, I led a double life. I had a good social life, and I was a fun person. Then I'd come home and sit on the kitchen floor, scratching or cutting myself or hitting my head against the wall. These acts would give me a big sense of release, in my weeping and angry state.

My husband knew what a mess I was in, but no-one else did. I'd go out walking in the middle of the night, wanting something bad to happen to me. I had a sense of overwhelming blackness, where there was no point in thinking about the future.

In hindsight, I can see that I had no self-awareness. My life before the babies had been an easy one. Things just worked out for me the way I planned them. I had no benchmarks for what to do when things weren't going well.

About six weeks after the second baby was born, my husband, in desperation, mentioned my situation to one of his colleagues, who suggested I had postnatal depression. As a result of this, I was admitted to a psychiatric unit.

I took my second baby with me to the unit, while the first one stayed with my mother. I finally had to tell my mother what was going on. She could not understand it, as she'd loved having babies and being a mother.

I hated my three-and-a-half weeks at the psych unit. It was a surreal experience. "People like me don't end up in places like this," I'd think, while contemplating jumping out my fourth-floor window.

After that, we decided to employ a nanny for the children, so I could return to work. She was delightful with the kids and gave them a wonderful life – much better than anything I felt I could have provided, I'd come home from work to two beautiful, clean, fed children, who were ready to play with me before they went to bed.

My GP prescribed me antidepressants, which I took for almost a year. These lifted my mood noticeably, but I still needed more help. I was referred to several psychiatrists, but I didn't connect adequately with any of them. Then my husband and I saw a psychologist together, as a couple. She was an amazing woman, who imple-

mented cognitive behaviour therapy to save both my life and my marriage.

The psychologist helped me to get back on track, giving both of us coping skills in what was a very painful time.

About 18 months after this, we moved overseas. I was improving, but it was still a very up and down time.

Eventually I felt I was a normal person again. I had changed though, as I had become much more aware of life issues and how to cope with what life throws at you.

We stayed overseas for four years. We had two more children while away and we've had another child since being back in Australia. With these babies, I could often feel myself on the brink of postnatal depression, but with awareness and support from my husband and others, I was better able to deal with it.

As a result of my experience, I have some 'survivor's guilt'. I feel guilty that I have an intact marriage, beautiful children and financial security, when, with fewer resources at my disposal, I would probably have committed suicide. This has resulted in my feeling compelled to save others, such as promoting awareness of perinatal mood disorders, through the Gidget Foundation (see box on right).

Cathie Knox is the wife of Sydney obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Vijay Roach. She spoke to Deborah Smythe.

A psychologist's perspective

WHAT is often called 'postnatal depression' frequently starts during pregnancy. Rebecca Dunn, a psychologist with a special interest in women's health in the perinatal period says: "Practitioners have found it more useful to refer to postnatal depression as 'perinatal mood disorder', as it occurs both antenatally and postnatally."

There is a 50% chance of perinatal mood disorder recurring if left untreated after the first occurrence, she says. "If a woman becomes pregnant again before recovering from a perinatal mood disorder, it will continue through the subsequent pregnancy and may in fact be worse than in the first episode."

Ms Dunn says that perinatal mood disorder can range in severity from mild grief and loss about the transition to parenthood, through to quite severe anxiety and depression.

"Factors that contribute to a perinatal mood disorder include biological, psychological and social issues. This naturally makes each woman's presentation unique and therefore difficult for practitioners to identify," she says.

"Sleep deprivation, a traumatic birth, poor emotional intelligence, a difficult relationship with one's own mother and stressful life events (such as moving house or job loss) are just some of the factors that can feed into the development of perinatal mood disorder."

The Gidget Foundation

The Gidget Foundation aims to provide patients, their partners and health professionals access to information, referral and support in relation to perinatal mood disorder. See www.gidgetfoundation.com.au

What made a difference

- My psychologist gave me and my husband the coping skills to better manage my condition
- Having a wonderful nanny for my first two children
- Financial security (most of the time) made things better than they would otherwise have been