

Cveta's Story



I moved from Macedonia to Port Kembla in NSW 28 years ago, when I was 15. When I was 19 years old, I started getting my first symptoms. I wasn't able to eat or sleep, sometimes for days, and I had hallucinations and paranoia. But life continued...and I married my first husband, and had our first son.

I had a nervous breakdown on my oldest son's 4th birthday. I was 24 at the time. We were having a birthday party, and for me everything was going too fast. The music was too fast, the people around me, everything. I was in a different world. My husband and I were smoking marijuana, and I believe that's how I got sick.

My father-in-law took me to emergency in Port Kembla hospital. There was a psychiatric ward back then. I was very sick, and I lost a lot of weight. I looked like a skeleton, it was very scary. I was in hospital for three weeks. I was in a different world, and it was very strange. I was put on a lot of tablets and I had to go for regular check-ups after I got out. I saw three doctors, and two years after the nervous breakdown I was diagnosed with Bipolar.

I've been in hospital ten times since then, mostly with depression, but sometimes with mania. It's different with each. On reflection, when you're manic you're all over the place, and you can't see how the staff are, or how the hospitalisation is. When you are in depression, it's in slow motion, and you see more. I've been in Shellharbour and Wollongong hospital. You're looked after, but in my shoes, being in hospital is the worst experience. It's awful to be in hospital if you ask me; it's an awful place to be. It's restrictive, you can't be at home, and you're locked up like gaol.

One thing is, as soon as you make a friend, they are leaving. You're going or your friend is,

and you're not allowed to keep in touch, or be very friendly in there with the other patients. Before in Shellharbour hospital it was better for friendships, but it's very strict these days. The best hospital was Shellharbour back when you were allowed to smoke in the gardens.

You need a visitor now to take you out. The staff at the different hospitals are very individual, very different from person to person, but mainly most of them are good. You'll only find a couple that aren't good. Although being in hospital is to help me, I don't like it.

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When I was younger and with my first husband who was Macedonian it was very difficult, I was under the thumb from too many people. We were a big family living together, and there were a lot of requirements. It was hard to be under that much pressure in everyday life. When I was living in the Macedonian community there was stigma, and it was shameful to go and see a psychologist or psychiatrist. You were not allowed to speak for these things or tell people you had an illness. At the time I thought, "I will never go and see one".

I did go to a psychiatrist though, a bit after I got out of hospital. I worked in a nursing home and one of my friends was seeing him, so my friends there sent me to him. I still see him, 19 years later - the same psychiatrist. He's a very good man. He's been my mentor and looking out for me for years, like a father. He was very supportive when I was getting divorced, and has encouraged me to write about how I got divorced to help other women like me, in a similar position.

My experience in a traditional Macedonian marriage was that you don't get very supported, you're pushed around like 'oh, she's sick, leave her, she's sick, she's sick'. They always emphasised that I was the sick one, even when we were with company. They were not supportive at all, and that was very sad. It's also sad for my kids to be growing up in that kind of environment. That's when my marriage came to an end. I got divorced in 2002 and it was very difficult. I still have a relationship with my ex-husband and his parents, because of my kids who are 16, 18 and 23.

I have had less hospital admissions since the divorce, I am more out of the cultural things and there's not as much stigma. I have common sense beliefs, not community and traditional beliefs. All I care about is not to get sick again. I do not care if anyone calls me crazy or if they talk about me and my illness.

I'm married again now, for six years to Hina who isn't Macedonian. He's got kids, and we've had a baby unexpectedly. The pregnancy was scary, and it was difficult. I had gestational diabetes, blood clots, and I had to have needles. During the pregnancy Hina and I split up for a bit. Then I got sick and ended up in hospital again. I was off my lithium, and there was a lot of ups and downs. It was a hard pregnancy mentally and physically. I went to Melbourne, I wanted to move there. I drove there and back, didn't get much sleep, and was really happy to be having a baby. There was too much excitement, and then I had a manic episode. I went into the Pregnancy Unit at Wollongong hospital, and I was in hospital two times when I was pregnant. At the end of the pregnancy Hina and I made up, and he came to look after me for the last stages in the pregnancy.

Because I was still on some medications, it took three days in the hospital for the medication to clear the baby's system. They told me everything was fine with my baby when he was four days old. Until then I wasn't in peace. I was worried that he was going to be born dead, or he was going to have some abnormalities. But he was born and he was good.

I got very sick when my son was two months. I had to go to special place in Sydney called Mums and Kids Matter. They helped me nurse the baby, and I lived there for a few weeks. Up there was a unit you can leave, and you've got everything set up. You have a changing table, all the things you need for your baby, and it was a good experience for me.

There was other young ladies there with babies who reminded me of when I was young and when I got sick. I saw them in much bigger problem than I was at the time. It was a very good experience and the staff were very good, although they're on to you non-stop. You're bombarded with programs and things to do, and you can't just waste your day. I liked it but I left too early. I was apart from Hina and that was hard. He slept in the car, and I thought I was ok to come home. There was psychiatric help and everything organised up there, but when I came back, I wasn't put back on lithium.

I got sick again, manic this time, and I was hospitalised in Wollongong for another five weeks. My baby wasn't able to come with me. Every time in hospital it's trauma, but this was the worst being away from him. The staff let my baby visit me, and it was good, but it was torture as well at the same time. I only had him for half an hour, it couldn't be for ages or for the whole day. I am not sure who decided I could only have him for half an hour.

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My older boys all moved out when I was in hospital, and I didn't realise they were never coming back. My psychologist, who I have been seeing for five years, helped me a lot with that. One of my friends told me about him. He was a great deal of help going through a process of parting with my kids. I'm trying to get used to this family now. Me, my husband and the baby. Before, it was my three kids and Hina. I see my psychologist very often, and I even put my kids in counselling with him.

My psychologist is South American and I think it's been good. He is culturally sensitive, and that has helped me. I have also been seeing a mental health nurse who works in a multicultural mental health service. I started seeing her 18 years ago. She now works with my psychiatrist because I was only getting limited sessions with the multicultural service. Her job is to keep me out of hospital, make sure I am well, and help with things that make me stressed like Centrelink. She knows my warning signs, and it's helpful because we share the same cultural traditions. If I have an argument with my mum, she knows where

I'm coming from. She is a phone call away, it's easy because she speaks my language. Hina texts her too if he thinks I am depressed.

In the past, I have had other mental health workers too. When my kids were little, I had a community mental health worker, she was very good. She would take me from Shellharbour hospital to see my kids at home and take me back again. She was also Macedonian speaking. You can't go far if help's not there, and special support from people in your community who speak your language is good.

I also had another worker from the Community Mental Health centre who helped a lot when I was separating from my first husband. That was back when I was on injections. It was really scary at the beginning because I'm scared about needles, but the worker was very good at how she did the injections.

I went to depression groups, and appointments for talking. I have had lots of support from different places, it's been good. My psychiatrist has given me the most support. Before I could see him whenever I felt like, I could just go and see him. Though now it's getting very difficult to see him and more often appointments are rare.

I see GPs, but they don't stay here for very long, as they are often changing in the medical centre. So we usually see a doctor for a few months, and then they'll be gone. We'll start seeing another one, then they'll be gone too. They've all been helpful even though I'm seeing lots of different ones.

Hina and I have a very good relationship now, and he is a very good father. I'm stable now, and the baby is doing well. What I want to say to other people who are ill is don't be withdrawn and ashamed because you have an illness, like I was for years. Don't blame yourself.

**Names and photograph changed to protect privacy.*

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