

Isabelle and Alex's Story



Isabelle's Story

I gave birth to our first son Dylan in Victoria in 2013. I had a fantastic pregnancy and a really quick birth. My mum and my best friend came to help me when he was born. Dylan was a really difficult baby, constantly crying, and very colicky. I wasn't sleeping, but I just thought, being a first time mum, this is what it was.

Mum went home, and then I was just crying all the time. I thought I was depressed so I went to the GP. He was really good, and asked me all the right questions. I wasn't really unwell at that stage, but I was beginning to notice that I wasn't right, that's why I thought 'I had better get on top of it'. I got a referral to see a psychologist, and was going to go on anti-depressants.

Dylan was only four and a half weeks old when I started to get worse. I hadn't started the anti-depressants, but luckily I was involved in a group with our church where the pastor had previously been a doctor. He recognised some of the unusual stuff. I was exhausted, and starting to get quite paranoid. I had thoughts that the authorities were going to take the baby away from me, and that I was being monitored. I thought my every move was being scrutinised, and I actually stopped talking. Whether that was because I was worried about what I was going to say or whether just physically I couldn't, I don't know.

Our friend, the pastor, told my husband Alex to ring the mental health team to get me assessed. It was only a couple of days after I initially saw the doctor. I had gone downhill pretty quick, and I barely spoke during the

assessment as I was so paranoid, and having delusionary hallucinations. There were three or four people at the assessment, and it felt like a big intervention type thing. I thought they were going to take me away and do all this weird stuff to me. After the assessment the doctor suggested I go on anti-psychotic medication. That was a bit traumatic because I had to stop breastfeeding, but by that stage I was so apathetic and zombie like that it didn't matter in the end.

"We found a private psychiatrist by googling. I couldn't find anyone with specific expertise in NSW"

I had people from the mental health team coming to see me every day, to check up on me, and see how Dylan was. They gave me different medication options, linked me up with a GP, and with a lady who organised a Post-Natal Depression (PND) group. I went to a couple of groups, but then I didn't go for a while as I was at a stage where I couldn't dress myself, have a shower, or leave the house.

My mum came back, and would pretty much dress me, as I was too anxious and confused. If Mum hadn't been there I would've been hospitalised. She stayed about a month to care for me. Being really unwell lasted about three to four weeks. After that I could take care of myself and Dylan, but I was still feeling pretty flat, because the medication does 'deaden' you.

The mental health team came daily for a while when I was really unwell, and then it was just a phone call every couple of days. They had linked me up with a social worker who was really good. I also started to see a private psychologist fortnightly, then monthly, to work on goals and stuff I wanted to get back to doing. I was really happy with my care in Victoria, it was quite comprehensive.

Moving State

We moved to NSW, then fell pregnant with our second child Jack. The risk of suffering Post-Natal Psychosis (PNP) goes up when you have already had it, so we wanted to do everything we could to prepare, and try to prevent it. The recommendation of the service in Victoria was to commence medication prior to birth, or as soon as you give birth. I wasn't happy with that as the medication made me feel awful, and I couldn't breastfeed while on it.

We found a private psychiatrist by googling. I couldn't find anyone with specific expertise in post-natal psychosis in NSW; there are specialists for post-natal depression and anxiety, but it's a totally different kettle of fish. I thought I would just go with someone who is well known, and into the stuff I liked; mindfulness based stuff. I had a really good first session, and we worked out a plan of attack which was the sole purpose of going there.

I had some friends who worked in the area in mental health, and through them found out there was a service that worked with mothers with pre and post-natal depression. I rang the health service provider, and explained what had happened last time. I explained I wanted to see someone in terms of looking at a preventative plan, and someone to have a relationship with after the birth just in case. They did a basic assessment to see whether it was an appropriate referral, and then it took about three weeks to see the psychologist. I was feeling good, but the purpose was to work on some of the grief and loss, and develop a plan for this time. She was really good at helping us get contacts in the local area.

I saw her fortnightly until the birth. I found her really supportive and encouraging, and we worked on things that were important to me. I was able to see her as much as I needed, there were no long waits between visits. She left it in my court to decide how often that would be. She also organised me to meet up with the early childhood clinic so that I knew them in case I needed to see them after the birth.

Initially during the pregnancy I was just seeing a midwife team at a hospital. They were supportive, and a lot of them hadn't really come across post-natal psychosis much and were intrigued. My psychologist was really instrumental in facilitating the communication between herself and the hospital, and had spoken to the social work team at the hospital.

They helped in the care planning meetings with the midwives with requests in terms of getting my own room and having the nurses take the baby overnight, which they did.

I got gestational diabetes so they had to refer me to an obstetrician. I saw a different one each time. I told the first obstetrician I saw about my post-natal psychosis. At 38 weeks they did a 'stretch and sweep' and I went into labour that night. I had my own double room, and it was pretty quiet being 29th December. Most of the nurses were really lovely, supportive and helpful. Jack was born.

I saw my psychologist when Jack was a couple of weeks old for a home visit. I was feeling fine, so I booked an appointment to go in. Before that appointment, at around four weeks, I noticed that something was amiss, and I called to see if I could get in straightaway, but she was away so I was only able to speak to another staff member.

It was in the early stages of becoming unwell when I spoke to her, and when I actually talked to her I was feeling fine. I started to get unwell quickly then. I was alone for the first time with the two boys, and started to question whether the voices on the TV were real. Alex contacted a mental health support line. They agreed I should start on the medication, and the mental health team scheduled a visit for the beginning of the following week.

By the weekend I was worse, and Alex took me to emergency. The psychiatrist on call was looking at three options for where I should be admitted; the normal psychiatric ward, a short-term ward or a unit in Sydney for mums and bubs.

I ended up being admitted to the short term ward, as there was a wait for the mums and bubs unit. I didn't plan to be in hospital long, but because it was close to home people could visit me. It's probably the worst thing to be in hospital when you are paranoid as it is one of those institutions that gives rise to all the lovely, bizarre thoughts.

They ran through all these rules like you can't have your mobile phone, and even though I was really unwell, mobile phones are such a lifeline to me, and to not be able to have it really kind of stressed me out. I felt I had to do everything right and perfect just to get out of there. I didn't want to be there. It felt like being in gaol, because they lock you up and they need a special code to get in. I was always worried that I had to do things by the book.

The first time I had a shower and dressed myself, it was a big effort, but I was adamant I would do it myself. I would say 'I'm fine' when they checked, but apparently it would take two hours for me to have a shower. They would come in and I'd still be there with my clothes on. There was an aggressive person there so I was really scared of going out of my room, but then I'm like 'if I don't go out of my room, they'll think I'm not well enough to function'. I was trying to battle with this so I could get out of

there, but I was just feeling really scared.

I was in hospital for a week and a half and didn't see my psychologist while in there, but she did help with the transition home. We didn't have the intense support where I was cared for at home like Victoria, but it was probably all the hospital offered here.

My psychologist visited me at home and then I saw her once a week for a while. Alex wanted me to see her more as he felt I wasn't doing as well, but for me it was a part of getting better, my pride, and wanting to try and do it myself.

I felt well about three or four weeks out of the psych ward. I saw my psychiatrist once a month a few times, just to talk about medication. My psychologist referred me to a post-natal depression course, and while I was familiar with a lot of the stuff, it helped me fully recover and see how far I had come.

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Eight months later I'm off medication. Those weeks being unwell were the most awful and frightening times I had ever experienced; however I think with the preventative planning and intense support I received, I made a very quick and full recovery. My sons, husband and I are now thriving, and I for one have an enhanced appreciation of life. I'm intent on making it as meaningful as I can, having been through hell and back.

Alex's Story

I had been seeing a psychologist in Victoria. With the kids there is a lot of anxiety as there's a lot of things I can't control. When Isabelle was pregnant the second time, I went to the GP and got a Mental Health Care Plan. Leading up to the birth of Jack the support was good, I started seeing a psychologist. They worked around my availability and I went to a few sessions before and after the birth. We also had a family session with Isabelle and her psychologist when Isabelle came out of hospital.

When Isabelle was in hospital it was bloody hard because we had Dylan and Jack; Isabelle was sick in emergency and I didn't want to leave her there by herself. If my parents weren't here, we wouldn't have been able to do it. That night I had a panic attack. I was in bed, dead tired and I couldn't sleep. I was stressed out that the kids were going to get taken from us because I was worried that I was

going to get mentally sick as well and not able to look after them. It seemed like a massive, overwhelming burden to look after them.

Going in to visit Isabelle in the ward was difficult. We couldn't take the kids into the ward, so Isabelle had to come into the foyer. I'd bring a bottle and Isabelle would feed Jack. It was very hard for me because I had the baby, and Dylan wouldn't sit still for long.

The psychologist put us in touch with a social welfare organisation. The case manager was good, and gave me confidence in what I was doing as I felt I wasn't doing a good job. She was happy to do whatever we needed, other than having the boys cared for during periods of the night which is what we wanted.

I wanted Isabelle to see her psychologist more after she got out of hospital and more follow-up would have been good, because I felt we were on our own a lot. A mums and bubs ward locally would have been great because Isabelle could have had Jack with her.

**Names and photograph changed to protect privacy.*

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