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Mother-to-Mother

Postpartum Depression Network

OP ED - ANDREA YATES - PPD WAKE UP CALL

Andrea Yates Not Guilty Verdict: Stop the Insanity and Learn About Postpartum Depression and Psychosis.

I heard a popular radio talk show host eloquently describe his thoughts about the Andrea Yates Not Guilty By Reason of Insanity verdict. "It's a travesty of justice. The jury was snowed." The mentally ill should not get a get out of jail free card." And even "may God have mercy on the souls of the jury."

Up until ten years ago, I would have loudly joined in that chorus. In fact, if someone had told me that one day I would be relieved to see a mother - who had drowned her five small children - be declared not guilty by insanity, I'd say THEY were insane to think I'd ever believe that. But not anymore. I've changed my tune. Ten years ago, when my daughter was born, a severe case of postpartum depression unwittingly transformed and enlightened me.

Just four months after I was so ecstatic and grateful to give birth to my daughter, I expected new motherhood to be the happiest time of my life. Instead it was the most alarming and terrifying. Nobody warned me that a significant change in hormones and other factors following childbirth could spiral a mother into depths she'd never imagined.

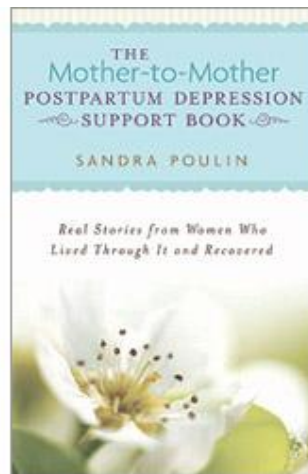
After nine months of pregnancy, of feeling the baby growing inside, going to prenatal doctor visits, decorating the nursery and attending childbirth classes, most new mothers are overjoyed to be blessed with the greatest gift of all, a precious new baby.

But perhaps we shouldn't take a smooth transition into this enormous, life changing event for granted.

Between ten and twenty percent of the women who give birth will succumb to postpartum depression. And for one in five hundred to one in one thousand women, postpartum psychosis, the rarest of the postpartum illnesses, will strike. Symptoms of this disease include hallucinations and delusions. "At four months postpartum, what was supposed to be one of the most special times of my life turned into something far beyond my worst nightmare. For me, this was the most cruel, twisted joke Mother Nature could play and probably one of the world's best kept secrets. No one told me that having a baby automatically put me in the running for a chance of completely losing my mind from hormones, crippling my thoughts as severely as the body is crippled from a spinal cord injury."

Thank God this mother, like most mothers with postpartum depression or psychosis, was able to find the professional healthcare she needed to help her fully recover. But unfortunately the Andrea Yates tragedy has shown us what can happen when everything goes terribly wrong.

Women with postpartum illnesses are exhausted, yet can't sleep (even when baby sleeps.) They can't eat, are filled with anxiety, cry a lot, and are terrified by thoughts and visions of harming themselves or the baby. "I was filled with thoughts of me as the villain, hurting my baby. I cannot emphasize enough how painful these thoughts were and how I also knew I was absolutely not capable of hurting my baby. I adored my little girl. I now understand the pain of mental illness.



Price: \$14.00

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I feel so much compassion for those who suffer. After all, if you have a broken leg, no big deal. But if you have a broken mind..." is how another mother describes it. Note that she explains that even with the terrifying thoughts, she knew she would never harm her baby. But she had depression...not psychosis. Even mothers who experience postpartum depression sometimes fail to understand how dire postpartum psychosis can be.

The guilt, shame, shock and confusion we feel when we experience a postpartum mental illness is devastating. And we new mothers expected maternal bliss.

Media talk show hosts and the public at large are venting their shock and frustration over the airwaves about how Andrea Yates's insanity plea was just an excuse, and how "evil" she really is. But Andrea Yates was suffering so terribly from postpartum psychosis that she actually was under the delusion that drowning her children was their only way to heaven or they would be doomed to hell. As impossible as it is for us to imagine, in her extremely ill state of mind it was an act of love.

Most of us simply cannot fathom how a mother could possibly become so severely depressed - or in much rarer instances psychotic. Believe me those of us who have experienced it never expected it either. But how can anyone who hasn't "been there" ever really understand this illness?

Postpartum depression is much more common than many realize. It affects 400,000 American women each year, and millions worldwide. Postpartum psychosis is much rarer and is always a medical emergency, affecting only one to two percent of births. The vast majority of women with postpartum illnesses do not cause harm, but in fact fully recover and go on to relish motherhood. But the shame heaped on us due to the stigma surrounding it (after all - we only talk about it when we learn of the most extreme case tragedies) keeps most women silent, even sometimes afraid to seek help. Which is exactly why once I recovered, I started my mission. I sought out mothers brave enough to share their stories in a "grass roots" style book to provide validation, reassurance, and much needed hope. Nine years later, **The Mother-to-Mother Postpartum Depression Support Book: Real Stories from Women Who Lived Through It and Recovered** was born.

Nobody wants to talk about postpartum depression. Nobody wants to scare an expectant or new mother. But how will we learn to stop the stigma and increase awareness, understanding, and help for new mothers if we don't ever talk about it?

We must do what we can to encourage new mothers in need to seek out professional help and consider anti-depressant medications, or find out what works for them so they get help quickly. As the mantra for PPD recovery groups go, "you are not alone, you are not to blame, and you can recover." For all those who care about the health of women and families, learn to recognize the signs. A great place to start is Postpartum Support International, at www.postpartum.net.

It's time to illuminate the fact that postpartum depression and psychosis will be an inevitable part of some women's birthing experiences, and mothers shouldn't be ridiculed and judged. Instead, new mothers must be supported so that they can recover and go on to become the happy, fulfilled mothers that they yearn to be.

Sandra Poulin is the author of the new book, **The Mother-to-Mother Postpartum Depression Support Book: Real Stories from Women Who Lived Through It and Recovered** (Berkley Trade Paperback March 2006). She can be reached at Sandra.Poulin@postpartumdepression.net.

For more information visit: www.postpartumdepression.net



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