

# UNVEILED

## LIFE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS #3

Becoming a mother took every ounce of strength from me, but I couldn't sleep. I didn't feel exhausted in the least. *Why does everyone talk about the post-birth experience as the most tired time in their life?*

Two days after the birth, with my brain on overdrive, I started with the phone calls. From my hospital room, and then when I was back home, I was obsessed with calling people. But I wasn't just calling my mother or sisters; I called random people—people I hadn't spoken to since I left my hometown after my wedding.

At first, the conversations were about me and my baby. You know, the regular. About the birth and how I was feeling. And then they shifted to me trying to help the person I was talking to. At one point, I stopped talking about myself and the baby completely, getting straight to the point. I felt that I was able to read minds and that I had special powers. When I called one friend who had a rough relationship with her mother, I started our conversation with, "How's it going with your mother?" I asked personal questions and offered my unsolicited advice in heaping quantities. I was totally focused on helping others, on saving the world.

My suddenly extraverted behavior was a complete change from the persona I had exhibited during pregnancy. For most of the nine months, especially leading up to the end, I had avoided interacting with people. Now, I was suddenly filled with a desire to do just that and to talk, talk, talk. It didn't matter if it was to family, friends, or acquaintances. I didn't know what to do with this flood of energy that was coursing through my body. It was like I was on springs, and I couldn't get off.

For my in-laws, my baby's *bris* was an especially exciting milestone, since he was their first grandchild. Of course, they flew in to celebrate the *simchah* with us. Even when my mother-in-law was at our house, I was on the phone with other people.

Incessant talking on the phone was one channel through which I expressed my abundant energy. I did many other things that a post-birth mother who's trying to rest up and take it easy wouldn't even entertain. I wanted to go visit my neighbor. I couldn't sit still; I was walking around high, not only pumped with physical energy, but my mind was racing too, thinking nonstop

thoughts and ideas. I was on a hyperactive roll.

Still, despite my obvious hypomania, things didn't appear that off. My behaviors were certainly out of normal range, but people who didn't know me so well probably thought I was just a more uninhibited kind of person. When neighbors would bring me food, I'd stand at the door schmoozing with them for a long time.

Another aspect of my peculiar behavior was that I had no judgment. People couldn't figure out what was going on with me. Things just looked weird.

A day after the *bris*, my uninhibited behaviors rose to a new level. It was only a few days but my mania increased over a very short span of time. In a matter of minutes, my subconscious opened up, revealing so much that had been inside me for so long that I was not even aware of. I sat down with my husband, and for the first time in my life, I was sharing painful experiences I had endured. I couldn't believe I was revealing details that I didn't even remember knowing.

It was clear to my husband that I wasn't merely struggling with baby blues. I was struggling from the depths of my core. It was obvious that it was time for serious intervention to stop this ever increasing monster that was overwhelming me. It was time to save that lost and frightened little girl inside of me. But because of my own stigma toward mental illness, taking medication, and stopping to nurse, I would first fight a painful battle, resisting that I was the one with the issue, before I would realize that mental illness did not, and never would, define me. ♥

### In Hindsight

Looking back, I'm grateful that my husband took me seriously, even while I was talking in a manic state. This helped jumpstart my treatment process.

Painful episodes on their own do not necessarily cause such a severe reaction. A very dear teacher of mine once explained that a person who has a genetic predisposition for mental illness and is faced with such challenges can be compared to an individual who has weak legs and must walk in high-heeled shoes.

In my experience, I believe the combination of a chemical imbalance along with the painful past episodes facilitated the full blown exhibition of my mental illness.

To be continued...

Zahava List is the founder and director of Chazkeinu, a peer-led support organization for Jewish women who struggle with mental illness and their female family members.