

COMING DOWN FROM CLOUD 9

After the immense joy of adopting her daughter, this mom encountered a special kind of depression. Post Adoption Depression Syndrome is real and affects more women than you think

BY SHARON VAN WYK

After more than seven years of battling infertility and recurrent pregnancy loss, we got the call that would change our lives. Less than three weeks earlier we'd started the adoption process and were shocked and elated to discover that a birth mother had already selected us. Our dream of parenthood was about to come true!

After the bliss

The day our daughter was born, she healed my broken heart. I could never have anticipated that I would bond with her and feel a love for her so strong, it literally took my breath away. We were about to start living our happily ever after; our fairytale had begun!

About a week later, I woke up one morning after a rather difficult night, looked down at my sweet, innocent baby sleeping and had the overwhelming urge to pack my bags and run away. I felt so disconnected and the only way that I could describe it was this sense of sickness coming from my insides. I loved my daughter. But how, after hoping and dreaming about this moment for years and putting my body through hell to achieve this motherhood, how was it possible that I felt this way?

Overcome with guilt

Each time a friend said to me: "How's it going, *Mommy*?" I wanted to burst into tears or vomit. I was overcome with guilt knowing that there were so many women struggling with infertility who would have killed to be in my shoes and yet here I was simply wanting to run away!

The guiltier I felt, the more anxious I became until eventually I felt like I was trapped in a bubble, watching the world go by. The only thing that got me out of bed in the mornings was the very thing that had me feeling this way: my daughter.

I became a pro at living a lie. To outsiders I seemed fine. I learned how to respond appropriately to questions about how I (now known as *Mommy*) was doing, I learned to go through the motions of caring for my daughter but in truth I felt



A happy mom and family Sharon struggled with Post Adoption Depression Syndrome after adopting daughter Ava but has since learnt why it happened and how to overcome it

dead on the inside. My marriage took a beating as my zest for life left me an empty shell, incapable of doing even the simplest tasks around my home.

So what was going on?

It all came to a head one day when my husband suggested we go for counselling. After just one couples session the psychologist asked to see me alone for a few sessions. In our first session alone she spoke to me about depression and the symptoms thereof. She also spoke to me about the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and I identified with so many of the symptoms she mentioned. Anxiety, lacklustre, sleep interruption, depression, all of which related back to my seven plus years' struggle with infertility and recurrent pregnancy loss.

Add to that the stresses of all the emotions and legalities that go hand in

hand with an adoption and I was a giant mess! I told her I was convinced I had PND (postnatal depression). But how was that possible given that PND is always related to the normalising of pregnancy hormones and I was not pregnant? I could not explain away my feelings or my behaviour based on hormones or PND. And yet, I related to every single symptom described in every article I read about PND.

Doing the research

I took to Google to find out if any other adoptive moms had experienced anything similar to me and I was astounded by what I found – PADS (Post Adoption Depression Syndrome). It was a real thing, it had a name, and I was not crazy to be feeling the way I did! And yet hardly anyone spoke of it. Hardly anyone acknowledged it. I was able to find plenty of information regarding PND but almost

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All smiles Sharon is now back to the passionate person she was before becoming a mom – she loves it

nothing regarding PADS, even though studies showed that PADS affected as many as 65 percent of adoptive moms. This is statistically significantly higher than new moms battling PND, yet there is little known or written about it and little support for it.

What this really meant

This would explain why when each of my friends became mothers and experienced PND they were surrounded by loving support from family and friends and yet I went through the most difficult transition of my life being largely misunderstood and with very little support.

PADS is linked with feelings of gross inadequacy, anxiety, coping with the stresses of the adoption process and of course, in most cases, what leads up to the decision to adopt is often hugely traumatic. In my own case, the journey to adoption had involved numerous invasive and painful procedures and surgeries, three artificial inseminations and five in vitro fertilisations, not to mention the grief and trauma of all my miscarriages and chemical pregnancies. In addition, many adoptive mothers will

form a strong emotional bond with their birth mother and will struggle to separate their own feelings of elation with the birth mother's feelings of loss and grief. It was for me a very bittersweet experience and I found myself trying to temper my joy because I knew that my joy was linked to such immeasurable pain and grief for our birth mother.

Getting better

In the end, I was able to overcome PADS with the help of therapy and the use of a mild antidepressant that also controlled my extreme anxiety. Within a month of completing the therapy and starting the medication, I started to feel my soul coming back to life. My lust for life returned. I was able to care for my family and my passion for cooking and organising my home returned. I went back to being the person my friends had missed and able to fully participate in their lives as well as being an active participant in my own life.

My advice to anyone struggling with PADS would be:

- **Recognise that PADS exists** and that it is common among adoptive moms, with many valid reasons for you feeling the way that you do and has nothing to do with you having made a mistake by pursuing adoption.
- **Try not to focus too much on your birth mother's grief.** Rather try to recognise that she made a positive plan for her and her child. Giving her baby up for adoption was her decision, and no matter how painful, it was an act based on selfless love for her child.
- **Have trust in your social worker.** Recognise that there are risks with adoption, and work with your social worker to ensure that you have an

ethical adoption and minimise the risks.

- **Go to antenatal classes or parenting classes.** These are attended as the norm for biological parents but not for adoptive parents. These classes will help arm you with some of the basic information in terms of caring for your new baby and will minimise your feelings of being overwhelmed.
- **Be sure to give yourself plenty of alone time as a new family** to adjust to your new circumstances. Not all companies are generous with adoption leave and many extended families want to see the new baby and spend time with you, but try to keep this to a minimum, it will help you to adjust and lessen post placement stress on your new baby.
- **Join an adoption support group.** This could be a physical group with meetings or an online support forum. It's important to find a safe place – any place – where you can get support from other adoptive parents who have walked the same path as you and understand how difficult your transition is.
- **If you are really struggling, get professional help,** whether it be therapy to help you come to terms with what led you onto the adoption journey (if it was, for example, a difficult journey with infertility), and to ensure that you can close the door on that chapter of your life before stepping into the new chapter.
- **If you need the support of medication, take it.** There is nothing to be ashamed of. Just like some new biological moms need the assistance of medication, so may you.

Lastly, know that you are not alone in feeling the way that you do.

Educate the people around you about PADS so that they know how to love and support you during your transition.

Just like any new mom, you need the love, support and understanding of those

closest to you. ●



For more information on my adoption journey, you can visit www.theblessedbarrenness.co.za. For more adoption resources and online support, visit www.trinityheart.co.za.