



# Husband in a Storm

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This book tells the story of my journey, from a husband's point of view, as my wife travelled from a happy confident woman through post-natal psychosis (puerperal psychosis) and out the other side.

For my wife and our family

...and to those who have gone or going through this, with continued hope and best wishes for the future.

## About 'Us'

It's worth starting by writing a little about me and who I am. The youngest and 1 of 3 children, my nearest sibling is approximately 7 years older than me, so although I can remember a very young age of having my siblings around, it wasn't long before they had both moved out to university or work. With loving parents around me, I was very lucky. Growing up I thought they were fairly strict but when I look back over the time, I was glad they were; being brought up to be loyal and fair with strong morals. We have a strong bond and as I grew up and started to work away, that relationship also changed and became more mature. There has always been lots of fun and laughter, which continues today; we love times like Christmas and the cheery feeling that comes with decorating the tree, house, etc.

At the age of 16, I successfully applied for an electronics apprenticeship with a local engineering firm. 1 of 3 apprenticeships on offer from about 2500 applicants, I'd had to go through a number of selection tests. I was a very shy 16 when I started the apprenticeship but that soon disappeared and began to quickly learn about interpersonal skills. Being an engineer I'm quite a logical person, detailed and like to get things right to the best of my ability.

Abi, my now wife also had a good family life, the youngest 1 of 4 children with her older brothers keeping a protective eye over her; she was brought up with fairness, loyalty and good morals. Abi's career started when she took a course at the local college in social care, whilst also gaining employment experience in a nursing home, then going on to do home care visits, before finally applying for nurse training. It was noticeable to most that nursing was likely to be Abi's calling, very caring, empathetic and level headed; never any mood swings and generally always happy. As her training continued so her confidence grew and she became a very capable and experienced nurse.

Abi and I met in the West Country where our families and homes had been for a number of years and funnily enough it was just before I moved away from the area to work that we'd met, but I still used to come back almost every weekend and meet up with friends and of course Abi.

The first time I noticed Abi was whilst out having a drink, she was absolutely stunning, friendly and brought a certain happiness with her. One of my friends knew her and over some time Abi became good friends within our group and when I was back home we'd all meet up. One of the weekends we all decided to head off down to the beach. The day was sunny, warm but not too hot and there was a lovely cooling light breeze off the sea, it has become one of my favoured memories and we'd all had really good fun. Having run round the beach with Abi chasing after me, trying to get one of her trainers' back that I'd taken for a laugh, this was the day I realised that I'd like to ask Abi out! I wasn't the best at that sort of thing, so the question didn't come for a few more weeks and after several discussions with one of my friends on whether he thought it was the right thing or not! Abi had been speaking with him as well, so unbeknown to me he was in a good place to say we were made for each other.

Sadly and having only known Abi's father for a year, he passed away from cancer. A wonderful man who I'd sat down on my first meeting and discussed current affairs with; he was certainly checking me out for suitability! With Abi living at home she'd given a lot of help looking after and caring for him. It was a hard time and following on was equally difficult, Abi's mum was grieving which showed in a certain amount of bitterness and with Abi being the only one still living at home, she would get a lot of this directed at her and I don't think she really had time to grieve for herself. Whilst I was trying to support Abi the best I could through all of this, so my parents as well offered us both a place to get away from it all and to talk things through.

Over the next few years I continued to work away, Oxfordshire, then to Kent, driving back to the West Country almost every weekend to see Abi. We would write regular letters to each other and these I think, were instrumental in gaining the depth of relationship, understanding and closeness we have. We are very much in tune with each other and I can honestly say that I found my soul mate, by which I mean we know each other very well, a lot of times we can tell what each other is thinking or feeling, we can be sitting watching something on television when one of us will say something and the other will say, "I was just about to say that!"

I'd decided fairly early on that Abi was the woman I wanted to be with for the rest of my life, although it took a while before I asked the question; it was whilst we were out for a meal with a couple of close friends in the middle of a restaurant, my heart was pounding, not even our best friends there knew what I was going to do. I leaned over and said, "I've just got a small gift for Abi I'd like to give" pulling out a small teddy bear and placing it on the table in front of Abi. She looked a little puzzled and then saw the zip on the front of it, looking pensive but excited Abi pulled the zip down, and instantly looked at me, happy and slightly quizzical. I reached over and took hold of the box and knelt down right there in the middle of the restaurant, I could see and hear the place falling silent as the other people realised what was just about to happen. I must admit that I wasn't expecting that to happen, it's like having a spot light shone on you, it made me feel suddenly nervous but those thoughts soon disappeared when I looked into Abi's eyes and asked if she would marry me. The smile in return was fantastic as Abi replied, "of course I will, yes", then the whole place started clapping and cheering, it was a great feeling and still sends tingles down my spine. As I write this, we've now been together for approximately 19 years and happily married since 1998.

## **Starting a Family**

In 1998, I was living and working in Hampshire and Abi had also moved up, it was a good time to break away from home and begin a new chapter and she started her first full time nursing job away from her training hospital; within a couple of years she'd moved to a much closer NHS hospital and it wasn't long before she had become a senior staff nurse. We'd worked hard and managed to buy our first house together; it was at a time when houses around the area were being snapped up within the week, but this one had stayed on the market for nearly 3 months, it's fair to say that it was a very tired semi with lots of work needed but both of us had walked in and were instantly smitten with the size and how solid it was, plus it had a large drive and garage. Over the next 7 or so years I pretty much transformed the house and garden, finally adding a single storey front extension.

The house was in good order and the first real mention of a family started back in 2002; I don't think there's ever a good time money wise to start a family but by 2003 we had decided that we couldn't wait any longer. We'd expected it to be fairly easy, but it was harder than we'd thought and it wasn't for another 2 years or so that finally in September 2005 we saw the blue line on that little white stick. We'd had a couple of previous times where we tried these pregnancy sticks but nothing had ever come of it; but that morning I remember very well, it was early 6am and Abi came running in through the bedroom door, holding the stick and whispered in my ear, "I'm pregnant!" I had an instant excitement, happiness, it's like getting a present you've been hoping for so long but were thinking you'd never get, I couldn't quite believe it, then a feeling of fear "Abi's pregnant!" A couple of weeks later and confirmed by the doctor we were making two very important telephone calls to our parents; we both typed in their numbers on separate phones and then made sure we pressed dial at the same time.

The following 9 months were pretty much a very standard pregnancy, Abi had some morning sickness early on, I'd ask if she was ok afterwards and give her a little hug, check if she wanted a cup of tea, water or something; Abi was brilliant and would just continue normal life, out of the door and off to work, she looked really well, fantastic and was in full bloom. We'd decided not to be told the baby's sex but instead have it as all part of the surprise. It was only at the very end of the pregnancy that we had a couple of little hiccups where our baby was having a few heart racing moments, however the baby decided it was quite happy staying in the womb. Our midwife tried to pre-book Friday 16<sup>th</sup> June for Abi to be induced only to find out that in our area you can't do it on a Friday, so Monday 19<sup>th</sup> was the day we were booked in.

There you have it, 2½ weeks over-due and with the threat of being induced, our baby decided that enough was enough and Abi began feeling the start of things on the Friday evening. A few twinges here and there at first but as the night went on she was getting a lot stronger pain and as we went through Saturday she wanted to try the tens machine we'd bought a few weeks previously; quickly re-reading the instructions I placed the pads on her back and connected her up and it certainly helped. I'd give her a back massage and prepare warm baths for her; making sure she had plenty of drinks available and food when she wanted. Inside, but not trying to show it, I was getting more nervous, things were starting to move on; a date that had seemed so long ago was suddenly here and it was unnerving. I'd already packed a bag of bits and pieces, including sports drinks and some light snacks that I thought Abi might want and would help to keep the energy up when the time came. We were trying to figure out when we should go to hospital, Abi phoned up and they said she could come in to be checked if she felt it was the right time, we did and she was looked over but it was still too soon. I remember being told by one of the midwives that they were extremely busy and that the worst case would be that they wouldn't have an available bed for us when we needed to come back in; nothing like that being said to you to calm your nerves!

By early Sunday afternoon, not much sleep and 4cm dilated, we were admitted and sitting in the delivery suite; luckily they had room, which was one worry less! By the time our baby was born, a beautiful baby boy, we'd had a change of midwives and Abi had been pushing for close to 2 hours, the strength of the contractions were virtually nothing and Abi was exhausted, there had been times of real anguish through the end of those 2 hours, where I think both myself and Abi wondered if our baby

would ever come out! I could see the worry written over Abi's face, I found it difficult to watch, feeling it with her. Abi was determined not to have an epidural and only to use 'entonox', the anaesthesia gas, for pain relief and remarkably there was no screaming from Abi. I'd been trying to keep telling her how well she was doing but you do feel helpless.

Seeing Abi losing energy the midwife went out and called over the doctors and ward manager; they arrived and told us that they may have to use the forceps soon, as Abi had almost nothing left. It was decided with the ward manager that there would be a last concerted effort. She reminded me of a stern teacher, there to get the job done, "right Abi", she said, "we're going to get this baby out"; turning to me, "grab Abi's leg and push it up to her chest when I say and keep telling her how well she's doing". It was overwhelming and scary but this ward manager was great; straight away taking full charge, just what we needed at that moment. She stood there telling Abi exactly as it was, getting her to push deep into the right places, no messing around and then after a few more tries the words, "Abi, we can see the head, you can put your hand down and feel it if you want" she did and looked at me with a smile, "you're doing great darling" is all I could say, I was so proud of her and the strength she was showing; then with another couple of pushes a little baby boy was born, 'John Alexander' 11:08pm 18<sup>th</sup> June 2006, weighing 6lbs 12ozs, I had a grin from ear to ear, that tingling sensation. As anyone going through the experience of child birth will know, the different emotions are incredible, the happiness, the nerves, the tiredness. As the proud father I was asked to cut the cord and John was placed on Abi, both mother and baby looked at each other Abi smiled and stroked his head, both exhausted; it was a moment in life that you never forget. John didn't cry when he first appeared, unlike most you see on television and then a sudden little flurry of action as he was too quiet and needed some suction to clear fluid from his airways but soon he was ok, even then he didn't really cry much, I think because he'd had a hard time to reach this world and was so tired.

Abi meanwhile had lost what seemed like a fair amount of blood initially following the birth, something I wasn't prepared for and it shocked me a little, we were told it was ok and within acceptable limits. Slightly later though Abi had another, again probably within limits of a single bleed, however put both losses together and it had become a substantial loss, a haemorrhage, though I'm not sure this was noted because of the separation in times; I didn't really know what was good or bad. Having spoken to Abi since, there was even further blood loss on the maternity ward when she was going to the loo during that night and part of the following day, of course, Abi never told anyone but neither did anyone check, so they went by unnoticed; the maternity ward was very busy and Abi's blood pressure was never taken during that part of the post-natal stay.

Anyway I digress; I was standing there in the early hours just looking at every part of him and thinking how beautiful John was, fast asleep and contented. Meanwhile, Abi was sitting in bed with a piece of toast, one of the midwives came in and asked if she needed help having a clean-up or whether I would help! Abi, in no fit state to answer that question said "no it's ok, my husband will help for sure!" so with no second check I was left with Abi and John in the delivery room. It was at this point that Abi tried to get up to go for a shower, that idea was short lived because Abi almost fainted, she stood up, her knees buckled and I had to suddenly lunge forward to support her

and put her back on the bed. Abi looked up at me with a slight smile, no colour to her face, shattered and just said, "I think a shower's out of the question!" When I look back at these moments and in hindsight, the fainting showed that she'd lost a certain amount of blood, plus I was annoyed that we were left to get on with it; I'd had no sleep for ages so was a little touchy and I dealt with some guilt over the first couple of years that Abi had been left with significant blood loss which nobody seemed to pick up on, I questioned whether this story may have been different? But there is also a proudness and respect because of my wife's character and her ability to still smile even though she must have been feeling terrible. We did the best job possible at trying to clean up Abi whilst in bed, not I might add, one of the nicest of jobs I have ever been involved in but a necessary one to support Abi.

Within a couple of hours, Abi and little one were moved on to the post-natal unit and it was the cue for me to go home and get some sleep. It was 3am by the time I got there and I remember sitting down in the lounge with a packet of crisps a can of fizzy drink, really tired, with a wave of emotions crashing over me; the responsibility of having a baby, having watched Abi go through everything and feeling helpless to a point, I slumped into the chair and just cried for a few moments. Eventually I took myself off to bed and fell asleep. Waking up later in the morning around 8:30am, I was trembling, just everything catching up with me and the enormity of parenthood dawning on me further.

There were set times when only the husband could visit, whilst families could only join in the afternoon. As soon as visiting time came, I went back to the hospital to see Abi and John. Surprisingly Abi's mum was already there but left us to it shortly after I arrived. Abi was remarkably chipper and in fact had been helping a couple of other new mothers on the ward during the night! I later found out that she hadn't really slept and when I look back, it did surprise me at the time but with everything else going on it didn't stay in my mind, but then neither had any of the ward staff noticed, even when Abi went to the nursing station in the early morning hours, to ask for a bowl for one of the other mothers in the ward who wasn't well.

Abi had waited all morning for me to arrive so she could have a shower, she didn't want to leave John on his own, nor go and have one without anyone knowing she was in there, in case she fainted, she was still very much feeling light headed and drained. Just as she had returned from the shower, Abi was offered bottles to feed John; it was a little strange because at the crack of dawn someone had already checked that our little one was already latching on to Abi's breast. Anyway there you go, a beautiful baby boy and two brand new parents, totally responsible for him.

It wasn't long before Abi was being asked if she wanted to go home, it seemed so soon to me and I couldn't really believe it, but this could be the normal procedure, I just didn't know. So, there we were being given the 'strong option' to leave once they could find a doctor to do final checks, for brand new parents it seemed very quick and felt as if we were being pushed out with minimal help in place. They had breast feeding classes happening that day which we were unaware of and I really felt we should have had more time so Abi could benefit, rest and join these types of lessons. Instead we were on our way, we left hospital on that Monday early afternoon, with John wrapped up and lying in his car seat, I felt immensely proud walking out through the hospital but also quite alone, we were now in charge of a beautiful little boy.

## **Back at home...**

The first week, wow! Experiencing the labour and child birth had been rewarding but also emotional and quite traumatic. We got home from the hospital and just sat in the lounge, John asleep in his car seat, a moment of serenity; I just stared at him, so beautiful. We'd decided not to have any family up to help because we thought it would tire us out having to think about them as well, but in hindsight, I wish we'd had someone.

I was on paternity leave and that week I tried to do everything, short of breast feeding; cooking the meals, cleaning, getting drinks, etc. so that Abi could sleep and rest when required. Initially changing and cleaning John I found scary, I was worried about holding him the wrong way or hurting this tiny little boy but with Abi's help I was soon a lot happier. The nights were hard, getting up all the time to crying, trying to learn what John needed and how to settle him, sitting there watching, cuddling, winding him, sometimes things would work out and Abi would have a couple of hours sleep before having to breast feed him again, then the whole process would start again. By the end of the first week and close to total exhaustion I couldn't think straight, as soon as I'd sit down my eyes would become heavy and I would be out like a light; it was then that Abi sat me down to have a chat, "you have got to let me do more, you are doing too much and making yourself ill" she was right of course and there was a huge amount of inner relief because I knew I was unlikely to be able to cope much more, I was so tired and been having thoughts of how I could keep going at this pace, my life had become so different. After our chat we'd agreed that I'd have some full night's sleep and to let Abi attend to John. Looking back now, that specific moment in time probably saved me from a break-down myself, I'd felt like I wanted to scream out loud, thoughts of "I just can't do this!" From this moment onwards and from my point of view the second week went a lot more smoothly, I was catching up on some of my sleep and you start to become more relaxed looking after your baby, able to do the nappies and less worry about bathing him, even though they look so small and so fragile.

June of that year seemed to be the time that everyone from the medical side who knew us, was going on their holidays; our family doctor, Abi's midwife and health visitor were all on their holidays and this is an important point to note because there was no-one dealing with us around that time, that actually knew what Abi's normal level or character was like.

Abi had a couple of visits from different midwives sharing the holiday work load; we hadn't seen any of them before but they all seemed nice enough. It was on one of these home visits that something happened, which threw me a little, something which was totally out of character for Abi. There was a knock at the door and I showed the midwife into the lounge where Abi and John were sharing some time. She wanted to check him, take his weight and length, all seemed nice; then she asked Abi about how the pregnancy went and her time in hospital. Now Abi and I had chatted since being home, about how quick we thought it had been and the feeling of being kicked out of hospital early, a few of times, but this time Abi was on the edge of the seat bending over, her chest pressed tightly into her knees, her head and eyes concentrating intently on the health visitor, trying to catch her eyes almost like a teenage lad squaring up to one of his pals, very 'in her face', whilst Abi told her of the problems we'd faced and

how quick we were in and out, the blood loss, Abi having to clean herself up with my help, almost fainting, etc.; I can tell you, totally out of character and I felt really uneasy, not because I thought anything was going to happen but just the invasion of someone else's space and so unlike her, but it didn't seem to bother the health visitor but it was one of those moments that stick in my memory. At the time I didn't think too much of it other than to discuss with Abi carefully later on; Abi didn't really seem to know that's what had happened and I think I hurt her a little at that time bringing it up. I left it there and put it down to Abi having recently had the baby.

Friends and family had been visiting over the second week to have a look at the new born; it was really good, each of them doting over John and holding him but it also gave us a little time off from nappies! We'd decided not to have anyone to stay with us after the hospital mainly due to the fact that they lived over 170 miles away and also that we thought it would be nicer for us to get to know John and not to have to worry about looking after others at the same time. The weather was very warm and it happened to be one of the hottest summer spells the UK had seen in a number of years and made it uncomfortable at times.

Abi was still looking really tired and about 10 days must have gone by, when our assigned midwife was back from her holidays, visiting Abi and John, it was great to see a familiar face and here's the benefit of people knowing what your wife was like beforehand, because instantly she said that Abi was looking very pale and she suspected anaemia. Blood samples were taken and sure enough a couple of days later the result came back to say she was and needed to start iron tablets, there seemed to be a little surprise that Abi had managed this well so far (before the birth Abi's haemoglobin level was around 145g/L, fairly high but on this test result, 10 days later, it had dropped to 97g/L). Iron tablets don't work straight away and need time to get the levels back up in the body. I'd also started cooking liver and bacon with kale, anything really that was a good source of iron! Finding out Abi was anaemic just added to my annoyance that this hadn't been caught in hospital and I look back at photos of Abi then and I can see how noticeable it is; the fact that I didn't see it then niggled me for some time. That was one of the last times we saw our midwife, as it was about this time that the health visitor would take over with regular weekly home visits.

During the third week we'd had a visit from some very long term and close friends but there was a difference in Abi, normally a happy, good natured person, she seemed to question herself and her abilities to be a good mum. Am I doing the right thing? How will I know what to teach John? What do I know that will help him? She had the occasional tears but nothing dramatic. People were saying the tears are just the baby blues, coming down from the emotion, the ecstasy of giving birth; the lack of confidence I put down to having this new and big responsibility but it was nothing we couldn't both get through and help each other with. Over the years that Abi was training to become a nurse, we had worked on building up her confidence and she was, before the birth, a very able and confident nurse. I'd sit with Abi and offer any support I could give, tell her she was doing great with John, what more could he want from a mum? At this time, Abi was already struggling but I didn't know the extent, inside she was desperately trying to feel love for our boy but just couldn't find that feeling; to me now, it just shows the bond was there even though she didn't think it was.

We were still having visits by the health visitor and following this one she arranged a doctor's appointment to run through the Edinburgh scale questions. Unfortunately our family doctor was still away on holiday; however Abi was booked in with an equally nice one. The score turned out to be low so no major concern but not known at the time, was the fact that Abi had not told the truth about her feelings for fear that our baby would be taken away! We came away with the hope that things would start to look up and that getting her involved with outside groups would do the trick.

This was the fourth week and we'd also had another visit from Abi's brother Peter and sister-in-law Ann, both are fantastic and will always help where possible. Now it was Ann, once having chatted to Abi, who took me to one side and told me that Abi was having problems and we needed to get a doctor's appointment. Let's just break here slightly, because Abi and I have a relationship built on friendship and trust, there is nothing I won't tell Abi and vice versa but Ann was just about to tell me something that Abi had felt she could tell no-one else. I remember it vividly, Ann took me to one side and told me that Abi was having suicidal thoughts, she didn't know how she could deal with everything; it was a moment of utter disbelief, a shudder went through me, from head to toe, it still does!

We booked a doctor's appointment for that day and I drove Abi up to the local surgery, with our doctor still away we were booked in with a locum. We sat quietly subdued in the waiting room, other than to ask if Abi wanted me to come in with her or not; it seemed like ages but eventually Abi's name was called out and we followed the doctor into one of the rooms. "Now, what seems to be the problem?" she asked, I let Abi do the talking "I feel low" a quiet voice said, she didn't really look at the doctor much, we were holding hands and Abi kept looking at me, as if for support; I can only describe this as if a wounded pup only able to talk through its eyes, wanting to know that everything will be alright. It was an awful feeling just there supporting but you can do little else to help. I'd never knowingly had any contact or knowledge of depression, especially post-natal illnesses or indeed what that meant for the person. The doctor continued to ask questions, at one point I had to say that Abi had talked to Ann about killing herself, as this information was not forthcoming and I must admit something that felt very difficult to talk about; the doctor started to ask Abi whether she had considered killing herself, the replies were quiet and simple "yes" looking at me constantly, squeezing my hand. The questioning then went to a further detail that I wasn't prepared for, "How far have you got? Have you planned anything? How would you do it?" at the time these questions completely threw me, wouldn't this just make Abi think how and accelerate the risk? But the locum was only trying to find out how far Abi was down that road. Abi didn't answer in much detail, "I've just thought about it, not how I could do it". The doctor's next comment almost blew me away, "well you'll have to try harder than that to kill yourself!" the ground could have opened up beneath me, stunned, I felt ill and the anger I felt afterwards. We went home soon after that, but I was still seething from the flippancy of the comment. We didn't get anti-depressants from this visit and with Abi still breast feeding she wanted to soldier through. "Breast is best" was the slogan of the day and it's a pressure that Abi felt extremely heavily, she wanted to do the very best by John; even though this government health message was being pushed hard everywhere else, our health visitors were much more realistic and if breast feeding wasn't the best route then a mum should not feel pressured by all the advertising.

A couple of days later and the health visitor was checking the Edinburgh score with Abi again, there was a little bit of shock in the dramatic change, over the space of the 2 days her score had shot up extremely high; we were booked an urgent third doctor's appointment, different doctor again but part of our surgery. This time we were told that Abi needed some anti-depressants and that the breast feeding would have to stop; this news was difficult even in Abi's condition, from her view it was just **another** thing she couldn't do, but with discussion Abi agreed. A point to note here is that with Abi being so ill and with the anaemia, I think the breast feeding was just another thing that was taking too much out of her. We came out of this appointment with a prescription for some anti-depressants. Abi was still very low and anti-depressants don't kick in straight away; they can take a couple of weeks or longer to get the full dose working.

It was quite early one evening and John was asleep, so I suggested that we both get up to bed; I needed it and I thought it would help Abi as well. It was the early hours of the morning and I'd been up to feed and settle John. Really tired I crept back into bed, Abi seemed to be asleep, though very hot, sweating, and I was just lying there thinking of what had happened to date. Then for no reason Abi just sat bolt upright in bed seemingly looking at the wall across the room, nothing being said just staring, zombie, ghost like, motionless, it absolutely scared the living daylights out of me! I leaned over, "you alright darling?" nothing, she didn't even move. I rubbed her back, she was sweating heavily very pale and again I said softly "Abi, you ok? What's the matter?" still nothing.

As I write this I can see the look, I can feel the actual moment, as if watching some horror movie. I sat looking at her, just talking, trying to re-assure her and after a couple of minutes, I somehow managed to get her to lie back down, her eyes still staring into the open, I said softly "try to get back to sleep darling". I continued to rest my hand lightly on her arm/side just to let her know I was there and I suppose partly so I would know if she got up again! I was scared stiff, lying there in the early hours, wondering what the hell was going on, worried about John waking up and disturbing Abi, I had no idea what was happening, nor what to do, I felt completely helpless.

I sat there unable to sleep just watching over Abi, after some time her eyes closed and she seemed to get back to sleep. I on the other hand was in complete turmoil; I didn't know what to do. I got up to have a look in on John, I was praying and I mean really praying that he would just sleep through and allow me to concentrate on caring for Abi, I wouldn't have a clue what to do if both of them woke up at the same time!

I walked downstairs and around the rooms, aimlessly wandering around, lots of thoughts crashing into my head, trying to work out what was happening and what I could do? I thought about phoning my parents, but it was the early hours of the morning and they were house sitting my sister's place about an hours' drive away and what could they do anyway? I didn't want to worry them. I went back upstairs and had another quick look in on John, so serene, our beautiful boy just sleeping without a care and then back into our room to check on Abi; she was still sleeping. I felt absolutely desperate and so frightened like never before, I didn't know what to do or where to go, ending up sitting in the lounge trying to get my thoughts straight, listening for any movement or noises upstairs. I couldn't do this on my own and just had to talk to someone, picking up the phone I finally called my parents, Dad

answered and almost before he had time to say anything, I began telling him what was going on, I was trying to hold back any tears but it was no use and I just broke down on the call, he just said “we’re coming now” and he put Mum on to talk to me, while he prepared the car and their bits. It was so good to hear their voices offering support but I couldn’t talk really, trying to calm myself down, I didn’t want to worry mum but I just couldn’t stop the emotion; I’m normally so calm and in control but this was on a completely different scale.

The next couple of hours were terrifying, hoping that neither Abi nor John would wake and to top it all the weather was atrocious, raining heavily with the occasional thunder, I just hoped it wouldn’t wake them but also worrying what to do if both woke at the same time, whilst still trying to understand what the hell was going on with Abi; occasionally sitting in the bedroom just watching over her, hardly daring to breathe in case I disturbed her. There was one more episode that night of Abi sitting bolt upright and then wandering the landing but I managed to get her back to bed and calmly talk her back down over a number of minutes and she’d seemingly fall back to sleep. Abi remembers looking in the mirror, thinking she looked like a ghost and also around the same time, tells of listening to a ticking clock inside her, racing her life forward and then suddenly counting down to the end, as if she was about to take her last breath.

Eventually and as daylight was starting to make an appearance Mum and Dad arrived, for a split moment absolute relief that I was no longer alone, I broke down in tears hugging them both. As the morning progressed, I left Abi in bed for the time being and even though she was awake, she was very lethargic and didn’t want to get up. I cannot describe how much I needed my mum and dad, they’d always shown and given their support for both Abi and I but they were also able to offer an extra pair of hands to look after John and keep us fed, something that would have been difficult to do on my own, it let me concentrate on Abi.

Now that Abi was on anti-depressants and no longer able to breastfeed John, the idea was that she would need to express reducing amounts of milk, so as to avoid ‘Mastitis’ (inflammation or infection of the breast) but in Abi’s present state there was no way she was able to; I decided I needed to do this, the last thing I wanted was for Abi to get mastitis whilst she was dealing with everything else. I talked to Abi, telling her what we needed to do and she seemed to understand. At one point I was sat on the bed with Abi using the breast pump and whilst doing it Abi became completely lucid for just a couple of minutes, it is what I expect of being in the eye of a storm, a tornado; everything is turmoil as the storm rages, then for one brief moment you are directly in the middle of it, you look up and there’s blue sky, it’s completely calm, Abi is talking normally telling me how scary it’s been and then as quickly as it came, it’s gone! I stopped expressing the breast milk and the storm returned; it never happened again. Later that day I managed to get Abi out of bed, washed and downstairs but she wasn’t really there, a glazed look and wandering around, occasionally looking at John.

It was the weekend and I spent what seemed like hours, looking through phonebooks and the internet to try and get help but at the time there seemed very little. I phoned one organisation who said they would get back but it didn’t happen for a couple of days! I really couldn’t wait for days and there seemed to be nothing for the husbands’.

We were all trying to talk Abi out of this visible darkness but honestly I didn't even know how to talk her out, what to say, what not to say and in the day following the ghost awakenings I probably said the wrong things. Abi's brother and sister-in-law had also come over to help and with a much better understanding of depression were able to help on what and what not to say; both of them were marvellous and also gave lots of help looking after John.

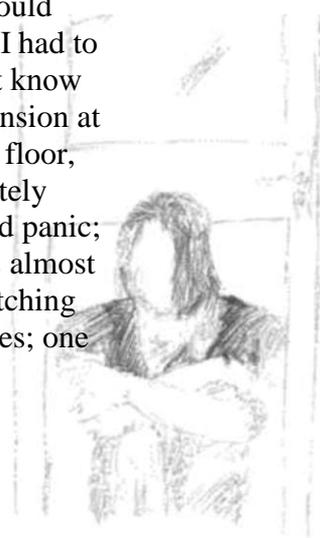
I talked to Abi and she responded but everything was so dark; she was worried about how we would cope and started talking about the fact that we had no money (this wasn't true), how were we going to survive, they would take the house away from us, leave us destitute, she wouldn't be able to work, I couldn't work if I was looking after her and to Abi this was real, this was going to happen!

As I look back, I'm guessing that at this point I was hoping that the anti-depressants would start to kick in, how wrong I was.

### **A Day Never to Forget**

It took ages to get Abi up and out of bed but I felt that it was important for her to be up and not allow her to drop any deeper into the depression, eventually getting her up in the late morning; it didn't help of course. It was noticeable that Abi was getting worse, as has been said by other people before, like descending deeper into a well, where the light gets further and further away. Abi would wander around the house, stop, stare, have a sit, get up again and have another wander. I was keeping an eye on her making sure I knew where she was, not hounding though, very much from a distance, so as Abi would not feel penned in or pressured in any way and it was this that had a dramatic turn of events.

I couldn't see Abi and my heart was beating faster, I moved quickly towards the kitchen asking mum & dad, "where's Abi?" then I just saw the back of her heels go into the garage; it didn't feel right with me and it's not a place she would generally go, I felt my heart really kick up a gear and I ran to the garage, reached the door and there she was looking at the wall where all my tools were hanging, I approached and asked her softly "what you doing love?" Abi looked at me and said, "wondering how to kill myself", that was it, said very plainly and matter of fact. I on the other hand could hardly believe what I'd just heard, it sent a terrifying chill down my body but I had to stay calm. Somehow I managed to get Abi to walk back to the kitchen, I don't know how because I was fearful of touching her or doing anything to increase the tension at that moment; I closed the door behind us and she just sat down on the kitchen floor, her back against the rear door and her arms around her legs curled up, completely withdrawn. I didn't know what to do, my thoughts were racing, almost in blind panic; Mum tried to comfort her and I went to the lounge with Dad, the pressure was almost unbearable; at that specific moment my whole life was falling apart, I was watching the love of my life, my best friend, my soul mate just crumbling before my eyes; one of the most calm, confident and caring people I have ever met.



Dad & I talked for a while, there were lots of scenarios going on in my head but in the end we agreed and he called 999. The ambulance crew turned up fairly quickly, meanwhile I was a wreck, I was worried about Abi, whether they would take her away and section her under the mental health act, what sort of husband would I be if that happened? This wasn't what having a child was supposed to be like. They didn't take her away and the ambulance crew decided she was just as safe in our house with the family, however, this was the first day that we'd heard of the term 'crisis team'. The crew had phoned the doctors and they in turn were calling out the crisis team (a community based mental health team). Meanwhile, I had frantically hidden all the kitchen knives, common medicines and house keys out of the way, I was so fearful.

I know now that for Abi this suicidal attempt wasn't a selfish act of not being able to cope, but instead in her mind it was better for me and John, that we weren't burdened with her, left looking after Abi, she was saving us from it all. The devastation of losing someone so close and dealing with what's left, didn't come anywhere near her thought process, you have to try and stand in her shoes and understand what it might be like with the depression, or as we now know puerperal psychosis, how terrifying that really may be; I know it's hard and even to this day I would not be so presumptuous to think I know but I understand a lot more. Here you have a woman, a nurse in control of her life and suddenly finds she has no control over what's happening and no-one else seems to be able to help; she believed that this was it for the rest of her life, that she'd always be this way! Abi explains it as if watching a movie, her life speeding up, in fast-forward, a constant battling of racing thoughts and with absolutely no control over what was going on.

The crisis team arrived at the house the very same afternoon to assess Abi and took us into the next stage of awareness and understanding of what was going on. They certainly agreed that Abi was ill and suffering from a very severe depression. One came out to speak to me and dad in the garden, explaining to us to make sure that we took Abi out for walks to get back into the real world, to see 'normal' life, so that she didn't lose touch with reality but at that time Abi was already losing touch with reality and having hallucinations. Knowing about the hallucinations only came about from one phone call, when Abi's sister-in-law put her in touch with her friend, she too had been on the edge between depression and psychosis and it was her that Abi felt able to ask and answer questions.

We took note from the crisis team of things not to say, like "snap out of it", "look on the bright side", "think of all the good times" and any other comments that showed our ignorance and started understanding what depression or psychosis really meant for a sufferer, for that person there is no way out, the thoughts of fear at someone taking your baby away, that you can't cope, losing the house, that you are descending deeper and deeper into the dark but rather being there for her, if she wanted to talk or cry, keeping Abi involved with John but not forcing or pressurising otherwise it would add to her feelings of guilt, being useless, etc.

We were told to go along with her views; the idea is that you are not causing any more stress or confrontation. This is really hard to do and ok to a certain point but there were times when I strongly disagreed with what Abi was saying and fundamentally could not just 'go along with it'. For these moments, I would agree that they were real to Abi but the key was not to reinforce her beliefs. I would say

something like “I understand what you’re saying but I can’t agree with it” or something similar and now when Abi and I talk looking back at those times, Abi says that’s what was needed, it didn’t feed her bizarre world and later on this approach really mattered because I’d kept my integrity, one of the only people Abi still trusted and believed in, even with all her other thoughts.

The team left us their ‘call any time’ number and had arranged an appointment to see their psychiatrist the following morning; it was only 5 minutes down the road. She had been given some relaxants ‘diazepam’ (commonly used in treating anxiety, insomnia & seizures) and sleeping pills, all to try to help the racing thoughts and calm everything down a little. I remember at some point during that day, phoning Abi’s brother and giving him the update, it also allowed the rest of the family to be told, it is only natural for family to want to visit but I wanted to limit it to some extent, so there wasn’t so much going on, we only lived in the 3 bed semi, my mum and dad were staying already and Ann was there overnight in the lounge looking after John.

That night I dreaded going to bed, I just lay there trying to comfort Abi, offering reassurance when needed and speaking softly, allowing Abi to finally drift off to sleep. I don’t think I got any sleep and if I did it was only very light, waking at the slightest movement, the quietest of noises.

The following day, Monday, and Abi really didn’t want to get up; she was still hot and sweating profusely, dripping from her fingers and not wanting to eat anything. Mum had made her some tea and toast but I had a real struggle to get her to even nibble it; again at the time unknown to us, Abi believed everyone was trying to poison her. By mid-morning, I’d managed to get Abi to go and have a wash and bath, although this brought its own worries as she was in the bathroom alone; I sat quietly outside, Abi didn’t know I was there. It was somewhat of a relief when she finally came out; I’d heard her stirring and crept down to the bottom of the stairs and called out to her when she appeared at the bathroom door, “you alright love?” but there was no response back. I didn’t know at the time but even with me outside the door I’d not realised that she was actually trying to take her own life in the bath, holding her breath and passing out, fortunately for me it didn’t work because as she’d pass out the body would do its normal thing and she’d start to breathe again.

We had to go and see the crisis team psychiatrist, it was a struggle but we did manage to get Abi to go, we left John with my mum to look after and drove the short distance to the appointment. We came out of this visit with a new prescription for various drugs, different anti-depressants, more diazepam, sleeping pills, etc. By the time we got back mum was tired and walking around holding John, I’d been worried about leaving mum to look after him, she suffers with arthritis and lifting him up and down was tough, so there was a certain amount of relief on mum’s face when we finally walked through the door.

Abi was calmer but this was due to the medicines given, although there were moments when the drugs seemed to be wearing off and you could see her mind starting to race again and you’d have to talk things through and reassure. Dad and I decided to take up the crisis team’s suggestions and get Abi and John out for a walk; she didn’t really want to go but eventually plucked up courage to come out. I only found out later how stressful this must have been for Abi and how that advice for us

was not that useful, for Abi at that time believed that people were able to see her naked, even in the house and here we were walking around the local area, the whole time Abi thinking everyone was looking at her; it's haunting to think that but it shows the level of trust she had in me to fight everything in her thoughts and still go out. These delusions had been there when she'd looked at killing herself in the garage and she believed that everyone would see that she was trying to attempt suicide, she was battling these thoughts constantly. It got to a point where Abi honestly thought that there was multiples of her naked, all over the world and that everyone could see her. Her delusions were growing, somehow she had changed the world and she was watching the news in the belief that she would see herself on it and they would report on what she had done, everyone hated her. She was able to hear people talking about her, essentially all out to get her.

It was later that day that Abi's mum and sister showed up, desperate to see Abi but I don't think anyone can prepare themselves for how bad this was getting and I was really concerned that they would say the wrong thing. Through this whole experience I was quickly learning to think about what I was saying, questioning in my own mind "how would Abi see this?" I'd spent hours reassuring, calming, listening to Abi, the slightest of wrong words or phrases could ruin all that and sometimes it did happen, people trying their hardest but saying the wrong thing, just one sentence and we were back to a few hours before and the whole cycle started again, reassure, calm, listen; you had to be living with Abi to understand the intricacies, or have been through or close to that experience beforehand; that's how fragile it was, so easy to take the wrong turn.

Peter and Ann were great and it was noticeable that Abi listened to both of them, but there was that closeness with her brother and he also had the knack of being able to listen and talk to Abi and calm her down to a degree, he seemed to be the only other person that Abi really trusted, believed in what he was telling her; this isn't to belittle the strong relationships between the rest of the family but just to point out that for Abi battling her racing thoughts, she believed in Peter and I.

I started keeping a small notebook with me, to keep note of the medicines I was giving and at what times, with everything going on, it was the only way to track what Abi had, similar to that shown below:-

03/08/2006

1x 50mg Faverin 07:30

1x 100mg Faverin 13:00

1x 5mg Olanzapine 20:55

1x 3.75mg Zopiclone 20:55

Faverin is an antidepressant normally starting on 50mg, max dose 300mg daily but anything over 150mg should be spread over 2 or 3 smaller doses, generally given in the evening but in our case it was the morning because there was a worry that it would stimulate Abi further, whereas she needed sleep.

Olanzapine is an antipsychotic normally recommended starting dose of 5 to 10mg and Zopiclone is used for insomnia, coming in 3.75mg, 5mg or 7.5mg tablets.

It was a waiting game over the next few days, hoping that the anti-depressants would start to kick in but 2 weeks is a long time to wait. We had morning and afternoon

visits from the crisis team, our health visitor was coming in every couple of days or so and not only chatting to Abi but she would also check on me, we'd sit outside on the decking, I remember her talking and giving advice to me, "it's tough and you're going to need to get things off your chest, make sure you don't snap at Abi, if you feel frustrated or angry take a minute for yourself, go and beat up a pillow or bury your head in it and scream". These were wise words and as she said them I knew exactly the feelings; our health visitor was really good. There were times throughout the whole experience when I had wanted to just shout at Abi, the frustration becomes so great, yet the need to be calm and supportive is always there. I was getting through all of this by just living one day at a time, not allowing myself to think too far ahead, it scared me! "What would happen to Abi? Is this it? Will she always suffer from now on? How will I cope?" for me it was simpler just to deal with the present.

The health visitor had also let me know that one of our local surgery doctors was on call for us, all I had to do was phone through to reception, give them my name and they would put me straight through to the doctor. These sorts of things mean everything, to feel there is someone there to help, specialists only a call away. I don't like to put anyone out but I had to call them one day, as I seemed unable to do anything to help Abi and sure enough as I called through, reception put me straight on to the doctor, she was in an appointment but said give me ten minutes and I'll be over and sure enough about 10 or 15 minutes and she was there talking to Abi. I won't forget the help our surgery gave or in particular this doctor's help.

We had family coming over to visit at various times and it was a shock too for them to see Abi like this. Abi's boss had called to see how we were all doing and I told her what was going on, there was real concern and caring, they're in that vocation and very supportive, we agreed to liaise with just two of the nurses at her work so that I wouldn't get inundated with calls. Occasionally one of them would pop over to sit and chat with Abi, plus check up on me. The company I worked for were great too, allowing me time to stay at home.

Unfortunately things were not picking up; I'd remember standing outside in the early mornings when Abi was still in bed, praying that today would be the day when we would see a positive difference, but it didn't really come. When we look back now there were funny bits, one day I'd ordered the shopping through Ocado and when the van turned up, Abi believed it was a government agency sent to spy on us, waiting on the side of the road, do you know how many Ocado vans there are?

Another time she was sat up in bed talking to me about John, nappies and how much poo he produced! I said to Abi, "Why are you worried about nappies?" she sat there and explained, "There'll be poo all over the place", (honestly I was trying to understand), "What do you mean darling? Why will there be poo all over the place?" Abi replied, "Because we won't have enough nappies!" I sat there with a slight smile and said, "well, I'll just go and buy some more" but she just looked at me and said, "we won't be able to afford it" and then it dawned on me, in Abi's thoughts we were losing our jobs, we wouldn't have any money and therefore we wouldn't be able to buy nappies and hence there would be poo all over the house! I must admit I couldn't help but laugh and Abi did too at that moment, holding her hand I tried to reassure her that this wouldn't happen.

At that time and as we were told by the crisis team, it was government policy to treat this sort of illness at home and you know I look back on that and what we've been through and I couldn't disagree more, Abi was suffering from puerperal psychosis, she needed the protection and specialist care that no-one could give at home, whilst also being kept with her baby to allay her fears of John being taken away, plus this would allow the mother and baby bond to grow.

A week had passed since the 999 call, Ann was still coming over every night and looking after John's needs; I could see that mum and dad were getting very tired, it was stressful, I didn't want them to go anywhere but I knew they needed a break and I said to them one day, "Why don't you go back for the weekend? You need to have some time off", that really helped them, but for me it was like losing your comfort blanket! On one hand I was so worried about what this was taking out of mum and dad, I didn't want to make them ill and on the other I remember thinking, "who the hell is going to give me time off?"

I always talk about "those 2 weeks" and by that I mean the time directly after the 999 call. There were moments during that period when I honestly couldn't see a way out, I felt so much pressure and wondered how the hell I could cope with it all and if it hadn't been for an immense amount of family support I don't think I would've done. Not letting myself think too far ahead and just taking one day at a time really helped me but that's just my way.

Into that second week and due to work load and staff numbers, the crisis team visits had dropped to just one visit a day, Abi wasn't getting any better, the worry about having no money was getting deeper and larger, initially it had started from me and Abi losing our jobs and not getting money, then losing our house and over the week it had expanded; dad would say to Abi, "it's ok Abi we'll help you out", Abi's response staring closely into his eyes was "you can't". Abi's mum would say the same thing, "it'll be ok, we'll all help" but it was of no use, for now Abi's response had changed to, "we owe billions; you can't possibly help towards that!"

Just in case you're wondering, Abi being a nurse didn't help either, in fact I reckon it made it worse in a way. When she was going through training she worked for a short time placement on a hospital psychiatric ward, she saw the same patients day in day out, but she was only there a short time and wasn't a trained psychiatric nurse but in her mind during the psychosis she believed that no-one ever left these places, nobody got better!

I was so tired, I could hardly think straight; Abi's racing thoughts hadn't subsided and she seemed to be getting worse and more detached from reality, to the point that one morning when the crisis team showed up my dad and I sat down with them to talk, they mentioned about the fact there was a mother and baby unit (MBU) but that they still preferred to keep people treated at home. This was the first time I'd ever heard of an MBU. If it got too much there may be a need to section Abi, the very thought of which still filled me with dread, the perceived stigma. They booked another appointment for that afternoon to see their psychiatrist again and left. I can only try explaining how it feels, being solely responsible for someone's life, a person that is your soul mate that you love and is part of you. Over the time I had discussions with dad and Abi's brother about what would happen if it came to having to section your

own wife! What would Abi think of me at the end of all this? It always came down to the fact that if it would help Abi, sectioning her wouldn't matter. To section someone under the mental health act seems so scary, but it only happens when there is a perceived risk for the child, mother or others, so that the person can get the critical care they need, but equally not necessary in all cases and there's always self-admission.

Dad and I spent the next hour or 2 trying to convince Abi that it was a good idea to keep the appointment with the crisis team psychiatrist, but she was having none of it, at that point in Abi's mind, pretty much everyone had it in for her, they just wanted to separate her and I finally had to phone up the crisis team, 15 minutes before we were due, there was no way we were going to be able to get Abi over to see the psychiatrist.

The following morning the psychiatrist came over to our house and assessed Abi again, this time he sat in the dining room afterwards with myself and dad, telling us what we already knew, things weren't improving, that we really need to think about the mother and baby unit (MBU), but I was battling contradictory information, on one side the crisis team had been telling me that it's better to treat at home and anyway they'd have to see if there was space available and here was the actual psychiatrist telling me it's going to be better to get her to an MBU. I told him my fears of sectioning her and it was during this chat, that for the first time someone had actually told us that Abi didn't **need** to be sectioned, if she would go to the MBU on her own accord, 'self-admission'. What can I say? Why had that snippet of information never been shared to date?

From that meeting the anti-depressant dose was increased and she had now been given lorazepam (this is used for the short-term treatment of anxiety, amongst other things it's a muscle relaxant).

## **Mother & Baby Unit (MBU)**

A couple of days later, getting towards the end of those 2 weeks, and with the crisis team visiting again, dad took one of them to one side and basically told her, "this is going too far, you have to get Abi a place in the MBU, not only for Abi's benefit but also my son's health, he can't keep this up". Dad was right; I didn't have any reserves of energy left and it was at this stage that they finally agreed to sort out a place for Abi; the only thing left was for me to get Abi to go there willingly.

The MBU was about 35 to 40 minutes' drive away. The next hurdle would be getting Abi's agreement. I sat down with her and tried my best to explain, this was a safe place specifically to keep mothers and their babies together, help them recover, to look after them and also help with the bonding and looking after process with the baby. We had been lucky in that sense because Abi never had any thoughts of harm to John and a lot of the times had still helped with changing and holding John, she didn't think she was good for him, in her mind there was no bond.

Remarkably Abi agreed to go, and as Abi states now she didn't want to, but it had got to a stage that she was just giving in, even amongst all the turmoil Abi knew she needed help, that's not to say she trusted any of them, she still thought they had it in for her. We took both Abi and John to the MBU and were shown her room, close to

the nurses' station, so they could keep a close eye on her. The staff there were lovely; the unit, although on the worn side, was secure and in a good quiet location, away from the main hospital, with its own free car park and even a safe and secure garden outside. Driving away that evening and leaving your wife and new child, the two most important people in your life was really hard, I knew they were in the right place but it was a sobering reminder of where we were; this wasn't the way for our new family life to start! That night I crashed out in bed, I was so exhausted, so many different emotions from relief through to despair, but boy did I need the sleep, I hadn't had much for so long.

The following day was the first time to see the consultant in charge of the MBU, a really experienced and understanding consultant. Both Abi and I were there and I talked through what had happened to date, he was questioning both me and Abi trying to understand where she was in this illness. The difference with this team specifically dealing with mothers, babies and their families was so noticeable, very supportive, reassuring and understanding. We were told that they should have had Abi sooner in the unit, at the start of the 2 weeks; the belief is that she would not have fallen as far as she did and would have been further along the route to recovery.

The decision was made to change the anti-depressants she was currently on, to Venlafaxine, not as easy as you might think as they have to ramp down the old ones and then start the new ones and you have that waiting time for the new ones to build and take effect again. As the meeting drew to a close, the consultant said to us, "don't worry you're safe here and Abi will get better", reassuring words although at the time hard to believe.

As with a lot of these drugs and the same is true of Venlafaxine, the dose is normally divided into smaller amounts and taken at the same time(s) each day to ensure an even amount of the drug is maintained in the patients system, with the dose normally divided into smaller, the higher recommended daily dose is around 225mg but some may need 375mg; Abi was the latter and during her time in the MBU was increased to the higher dose.

I spent all the time I could at the MBU, every day after work, travelling down and spending 2 or 3 hours with Abi and John; with every visit hoping to see glimpses of the old Abi but it rarely happens that fast. At the weekends and in the visiting hours, I'd be there; it soon becomes almost a routine. Those first few days were tough in one respect but a relief that finally she was with people that thoroughly understood this illness and it finally allowed my mum, dad and Ann to go home and resume some normality.

The next day was time for me to get back to work. It was tough though and I found it difficult to concentrate fully, thinking about Abi and John, in addition to trying to deal with the work that had built up. Colleagues were asking how things were going with the new arrival, not knowing what had unfolded; within reason I was open about it. I had a chat with my line manager that morning and told him what was happening at home; I felt it important so he knew what I was dealing with in my personal life, alongside doing my work.

Chatting about it with colleagues, although difficult proved interesting and helpful, you find the whole range of people; some were completely unaware, others had family members who had suffered from depression. One person even came to see me

and offered me the chance to chat if ever I needed to, as her aunt and mother had both suffered with puerperal psychosis and it allows you to see that you're not actually alone.

The day soon came to an end and the time hit 4pm, I rushed out of work and drove straight down to the MBU. I arrived at about 4:30pm, walked across the car park to the entrance and rang the bell. One of the staff let me in to see Abi and John; as expected no real change but it was great to see them both and cuddle my little boy. Generally I just sat with Abi and occasionally she'd talk to me about how bad things were. She'd sit there and say that it was just like 'groundhog day', and then on the other hand would have large parts of memory loss; she couldn't remember our wedding day, the fact we were married, etc. it's pretty hard to hear that sort of thing and it would hurt inside but you have to remember that it's just the illness.

Abi was asking for me to bring in the wedding album, to try and jog her memory. I went home that night and got together some pictures of our life, John's early days, and the wedding album, I'd made a small hand held photo album of the key ones that Abi could keep with her and we sat together looking at them the next day. It was good in one way because it allowed Abi to see those currently forgotten moments but of course the flip side is that she would then really worry that she couldn't remember, "do you think I'll always be like this?" Abi would ask.

Changes don't happen overnight and it takes time for the drugs to kick in, Abi believed she had been put in the mother & baby unit because she had been reported to the NSPCC for being a bad mother and ruining everything. Abi would tell me quietly that the staff members weren't sterilising John's milk bottles properly, so that they could report her further!

Soon enough Abi had, over a few days, been transferred fully onto the venlafaxine and it was again a waiting game to see them build up in her system. Treatment is based around the particular person, what works for one doesn't necessarily work for others and this is the importance of having a mother and baby unit and an individualised treatment plan, with all the necessary specialists and close relative(s).

Paulo Nutini's album 'These Streets' had just been released and with the increased travelling, I would listen to it regularly whilst driving down to the MBU, some of the sentences used in his songs seemed to be very apt for the situation and sometimes would bring me to tears whilst sitting in the car park outside the MBU. Up until recently, on hearing the album, it would take me back to certain moments during that time and even the emotions I felt.

It was noticeable that the delusions were now subsiding, though Abi was still very much struggling with the depression but there were glimmers of hope, she was now much more involved with John's care, she would give me a cuddle when I arrived, something that had been missing for so long, we would sit together for long periods and she would start to talk through more things, trying to get some of the memories straight. Recovery is very much the odd good day here and there, which slowly grows over time to more and more better days. When it was time to go home, I got in my car and just sat for a moment, happier that I'd finally seen a glimpse of the real Abi.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to last, it was early one Sunday morning and my phone was ringing, it was the MBU nurse telling me that Abi had taken a turn for the worse and that the unit were considering sectioning her that morning, there weren't enough staff to cope with her behaviour; this would mean John coming back with me and Abi being moved to an adult ward. I can't tell you how much my heart sank, "what now?" I thought, "Why?"

I said to the nurse, "I'm on my way now; I'll be down in the next 40 minutes". Not being told anymore on the phone, I got in my car and raced down to the unit, it seemed like the longest journey and every mile thinking "why would they have to section her?, she's in the right place, surely this is what the MBU is for"

Parking the car up and running across to the door, I nervously rang the bell and was greeted by the senior nurse; she took me to one side and started to explain that Abi had gone into what they called mania; an abnormal state of heightened, elevated, euphoric and/or irritable mood, high energy levels, talking rapidly, etc. and if they could not get it under control soon, then they would have her sectioned; there was a meeting already set up with the unit psychiatrists! Abi had, the night before been trying to organise a party with the other patients, telling them that it was the medication that was making them ill and to stop taking them. She'd been caught throwing her medication over the fence outside. Meanwhile there had been a complaint by one of the other husband's that his wife had been upset by everything going on.

I felt really annoyed and a little betrayed by the MBU, I'd spent every allowable hour at the unit visiting Abi, looking after her and John, so how would this help Abi? How taking John away and moving her to an adult ward would do any more than send her backwards? It seemed more about staff availability than what was right for Abi! I just couldn't see. I asked "If I stay with Abi all day and allow the drugs to take an effect, can we avoid this whole situation?" the answer was simply "probably yes".

I went into the unit and found Abi over in a small area, generally used for meal times; I might have been told what to expect but it doesn't really prepare you! I was only just about understanding how to deal with the psychosis and the deep depression, suddenly Abi was far over the other side of the spectrum and her speech was rapid, she was completely immersed in the plans she was making, telling me about the fact that the staff were upset that she had planned a party; eager to tell me that everything was alright, she'd sorted it all, we weren't going to lose the house, telling me how great she felt and that she was better and no longer needed the medicines! The psychosis was back but now in a different way, Abi was convinced that she and a couple of the other women in the unit were going to London because she had a meeting planned with the queen and she'd agreed to help all the people around the world with money that she was donating.

Abi had also written a letter to Tony Blair and was quick to show me, "take this and post it for me, please" she said and sat next to me while I read it, the gist was that Abi was telling him it was time to step down and she was taking over the running of the government, because obviously he couldn't do it properly! She'd found her mobile phone and even started texting strange messages to her friends, to let them know she was absolutely fine, some of which didn't have a clue what was going on!

This was a new and dramatic turn of events and one I found even harder to deal with, unlike the depressive side, this was more worrying Abi believed she could do anything, almost like being a superwoman! We sat talking, I was trying to keep her occupied and away from the other patients, constantly with the worry hanging over me that they would section her; it was an immensely tiring day. It was another time when the staff had told me to 'go along with her' but again it's vital not to reinforce. My wife was here risking being sectioned and losing contact with John for whatever period and in my mind this was not going to happen. You have to be so careful, not disagreeing that what Abi is experiencing is real to her but not reinforcing any beliefs that would just accelerate her even further in to the mania. Trying to get her to take the medicines was very difficult and seemed to take a good half an hour of trying to reason, I could see Abi get a little irritated at times and it really was a fine line that I was walking and I was only too aware of. In the end I was being honest but it got to a stage when I was so frustrated and scared about her being sectioned that I nearly broke down in front of her, "for gods' sake, this is the illness Abi, you need to take the drugs as you are running in a lot higher mood than you should be", Abi calmed a little, looked at me and reached for my hand, saying "it's ok, I'll do it for you". Through that whole day I was consciously trying to bring Abi down to a calmer level but very aware of watching her every facial expression, every move and mood change, always in the back of my mind keeping her away from other patients, thinking "if I don't manage this Abi will be sectioned."

When we've looked back and talked about these times, Abi remembers this moment, she saw me start to cry and then hold it in and from her view it was like battling the mania with the reality, she trusted me, she believed that as usual I would always tell her the truth, Abi says that if I had gone along with her at that time it would have just fuelled the situation, there would not have been any reality stake in the ground.

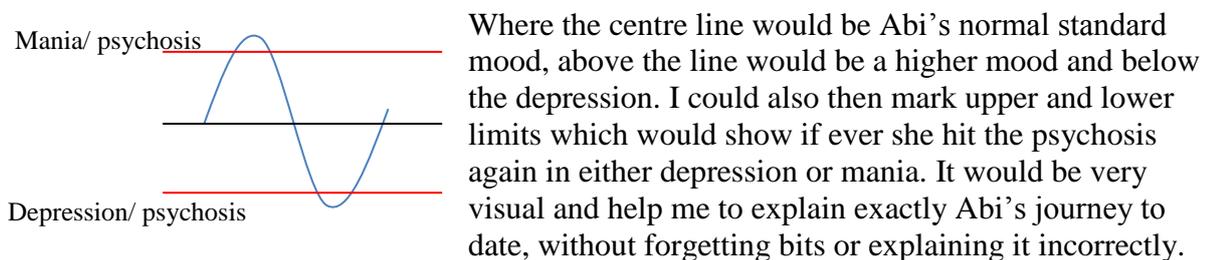
I phoned Abi's brother, to let him know the latest and he also popped over during the day; it gave me a slight break from it all. As the day went on and got much later, so the medicines started to do their job and she became a lot calmer, finally the staff said that they would now keep her in the MBU, although there was the caveat that they would review it, if Abi had a similar episode. The main thing was that I had avoided Abi being removed, I was so relieved but also worried about what might happen when I went home that night, would Abi resort back to a more manic state? I got a very quick look at my little boy that day, before having to leave to drive home. I got into my car, completely exhausted and just sat there, close to tears but angry as well, gritting my teeth I let out an angry shout, pure frustration, my head resting on my hands grabbing the steering wheel, sitting there thinking about what would happen if this is it, what would it mean for our new family? How would I look after Abi and John? I thought back to when we had married, we meant our vows 'in sickness and in health' and that wasn't going to change now! It was about 20 minutes before I drove out of the car park that night.

Arriving home I made my way up to bed, lying there trying to get to sleep but with constant thoughts of Abi, praying that everything would be ok, that the phone wouldn't ring again, terrified that the MBU would be on the other end; fortunately it didn't happen. Waking up the following day and getting ready for work, I was hoping that all was ok down at the MBU, caught in between a rock and a hard place; I wanted to know how things were but equally didn't want to phone them up! It was while at

work a couple of hours later that I finally got the courage to phone; there'd been no more mania, Abi had been calm and ok, not much else said but it was a relief.

I travelled back down to the MBU straight after work again, there was always an air of nervousness as I got there and walked to the entrance, again greeted by one of the nurses, this time she thanked me for my efforts the day before and followed it by telling me that Abi had gone back down into a depression. This illness was so demoralising at times, what was going to happen next? Could I expect to see this swing of moods again? Would I be able to do anything next time? They'd increased the venlafaxine again and it was the first time that the doctor talked to me about the possibilities of Abi being bi-polar, it felt like another punch to the face! I didn't know anything about bi-polar or what that meant and when he started to explain it, I was terrified; Abi could potentially be like this for life? After giving birth? A manic-depressive? He was interested again in not only how Abi was normally, but whether there had been any signs through her life to date and also what her mood had been like directly after the birth and I tried to explain, it's difficult in all the turmoil and emotions that are flying around, I felt that if I said the wrong thing that Abi's treatment would be altered and might have a detrimental effect. I'd think hard but she had always been so down to earth with no great mood changes. I talked about the higher level she'd been on the day after the birth but I didn't know how 'high' that actually related to, it certainly wasn't anywhere near the mania we'd just experienced. There is in general a certain pattern that can be associated to some bi-polar mothers after giving birth and although Abi was close, when you got down to the detail there were subtle differences.

I stayed until kicking out time that night with Abi and it was so sad to see her back in the depression again, although in my mind more manageable than the mania and it wasn't as deep as she had been. The funny thing through all this was how Abi looked after John so well, it was only in the extremes of psychosis that she'd been unable, we're only talking about a few days in total. The staff would say how she had always dealt so well with John. Abi never really liked me going but I had to, I said good night and drove back home, thinking constantly of how to show her normal mood and her changeable moods to date. I related it to my electronics background and sinusoidal curves, a wave line that change around a centre line, as shown.



Not wanting to waste any time and so I could show the doctor and staff the next day, I set about drawing as soon as I got back home. Knowing what we'd been through to date and using the day after John was born as a starting point, I was able to draw my perspective of Abi's moods. It proved an invaluable way of showing and talking about Abi's journey so far, and the consultant was really interested when I showed him the following day; it gave a lot more clarity. It wasn't to scale and it was only my thoughts on how to show moods with certain points highlighted.

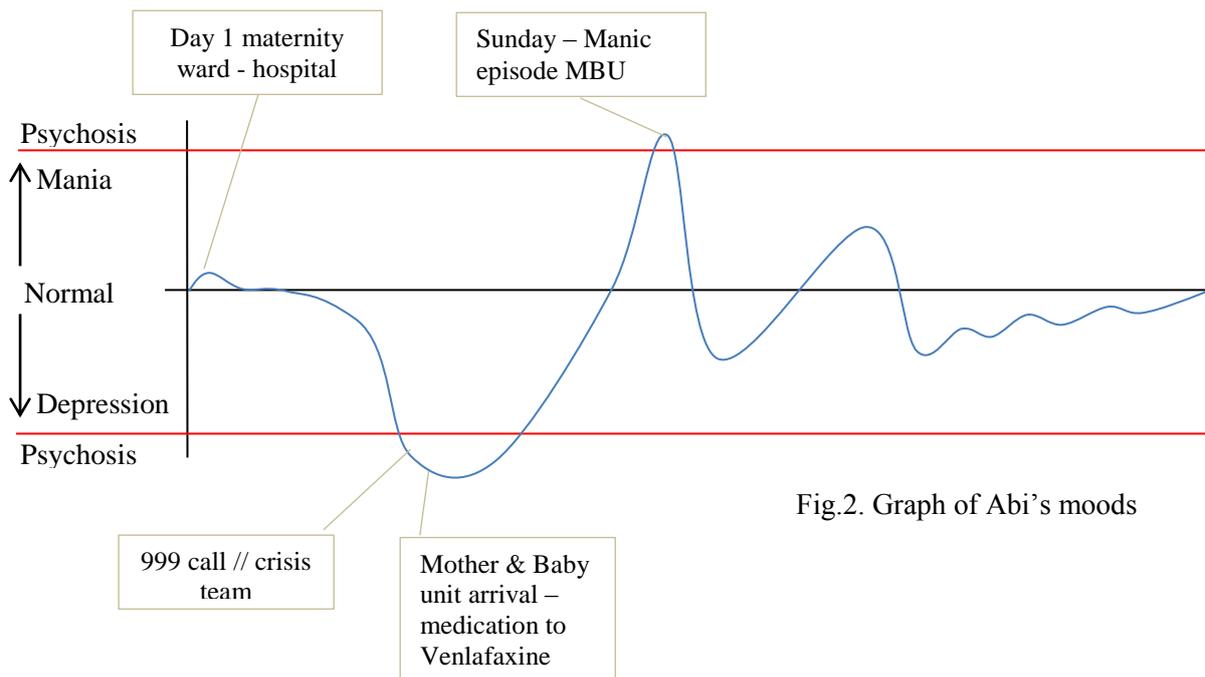


Fig.2. Graph of Abi's moods

Over the following days we were seeing improvements in Abi, the depression didn't seem so deep and we hadn't had any return to the mania, she was having chats with the ward manager, part of the occupational therapy and I know during that time a lot came out including lots of tears over her father's death and the tough time she'd had to cope with at home in the aftermath; Abi even told her Mum during one visit, how that time had been and it really did help to get those things off her chest. Throughout the whole period, we'd kept visitors down to a minimum, only close family and the odd visit from one of Abi's colleagues but for most it was a shock when they first saw her and it was a real concern for me who would be visiting Abi because it's such a fragile time. For instance, Abi remembers one person phoning her up at the MBU and ending up going through all their problems with Abi! It wasn't meant to harm, it was just people not understanding fully what Abi was dealing with, it was crushing to see and really tiring to deal with; I'd get the whole story when turning up to visit and spend a lot of time discussing her fears and the questioning that would arise from that sort of conversation.

I was starting to see the occasional better day and Abi was becoming more talkative and starting to tell me how she had felt at certain times through the experience, not lots but some, but they were painful moments. For me it was good to see the positive changes but always in the back of my mind I was still fearful that we would see more mood swings again. It wasn't long before the staff at the MBU started to discuss what's called 'leave into the community' i.e. Abi having a walk out of the unit with me for an hour and was really the start of getting Abi ready to go back home. So with John looked after by the staff, Abi and I signed out; what a feeling, it was great actually leaving the unit with Abi, though I was worried about whether it would be too much, or if her mood would suddenly change; for Abi I think it was like breaking out of prison, we held hands and left the unit.

At that time the MBU was situated away from the main hospital at the back of the old derelict hospital which had been knocked down to be redeveloped for housing, the beauty was that it was well out of the way of lots of people, very quiet and had the great bonus for a visitor that you didn't have to worry about getting a parking space or paying fees, or indeed too much rush hour traffic to get there.

It was a warm, partly sunny day and with some excitement and trepidation we started our walk down the quiet road away from the unit, it had seemed such long time since we'd done anything like this and it was good for Abi to finally get away from the MBU and see the world outside again. Abi would ask questions about John, "Do you think all of this will affect John? I'd reply "no, he's so young and when we look back in years to come, all of this will be such a small period of time", she'd squeeze my hand. Abi would ask me lots of questions checking for confirmation, for support, it was noticeable how Abi's confidence was in shatters. We only walked around the block before coming back to the MBU but it gave me hope, there was light at the end of all of this and things would get better.

For me, the silver lining to all of this is that I think it actually helped both of us and John, it was like having your very own lessons on parenting, looking after a new baby; John had, whilst in the MBU, learnt to sleep through the majority of the night, he'd been taught his routine so to speak and because of the different people around he also had a good socialising.

Soon after that we were allowed out for a longer walk, this time ending up at a big supermarket. Then the opportunity to take Abi back home for an hour or so and return drive back to the unit, for Abi to see our house for the first time in many weeks was fantastic and a real heart-warming feeling, to be able to make your wife a drink, sit in your own chairs together in our house, brilliant. It was soon over but all of these outings were about building Abi's confidence again and each time gave more hope. Sure Abi was still suffering but it was getting better and for a moment I could see us all back together at home. A nursing friend of Abi's would also take her out for walks, even grabbing a drink at the main hospital canteen.

The next stage of release had been organised, a weekend back at home with John, completely away from the unit; I couldn't wait, even though I had terrible nerves not only about Abi but also about having John back; although I'd cuddled him and fed him at the MBU, I hadn't lived with him overnight for so long. It was the Thursday before that weekend and I turned up to visit Abi, greeted by one of the staff again, who pulled me to one side and said "can I have a quiet word?", my heart sank and a heavy feeling of dread ran straight through my body, "Abi's mood is running slightly higher than normal again, not as high as before but we need to monitor it closely, we've given her some drugs to calm it all down", it just didn't seem real and I felt absolutely numb, "not again, please!" The nurse was right though, Abi wasn't as bad and there was no psychosis this time, just a very bubbly person; I was still very aware of what I was saying etc. but was getting more proficient at dealing with these situations, I still hated the higher moods though!

The following day we had a meeting booked with the key staff, consultant, etc. Abi had calmed down again and back in a more subdued mood. We sat in the meeting room and started to discuss the mood swings we'd seen, this time the consultant said

to both of us, “I think we have to consider the possibility that Abi may be bi-polar and if so, may need to have been given a mood stabiliser, known as Lithium” it made me shudder, this could be for life! What would that mean for all of us, how would we cope? Financially? Everything rushed through my head again but I had to deal with what I knew at that particular moment and again not try to think ahead; it might be ‘head in the sand’ but it was the only way I had got through to date. He also added that we didn’t need to do anything at the moment, we could continue as we were and it gave me time to research what being on lithium may mean. The weekend stay at home was also put on hold because of the need to monitor Abi and although disappointing, it was a necessary delay. I stayed back after the meeting, as he wanted to discuss more about the Bi-polar and Lithium option, at that point there was no way I wanted Abi to be put on Lithium, in my mind this could affect the Abi I really knew and we agreed for me to think about it, there was no rush.

The whole lithium question was another point at which I felt massive pressure on my shoulders, this was a decision that I felt could alter her future life, it wasn’t something Abi could just take and stop if she wanted to, there were side effects to consider, regular blood tests and my fear of losing a part of her character. I researched it on the internet late into the nights, reading as much as I could, trying to weigh up the pros and cons but always came back to not needing or wanting to do it at this moment. I’d discussed it with Abi’s brother as well and he was very much in agreement not to go down that route.

It wasn’t that long until things had settled down again and the weekend had been re-organised and it went absolutely fine, it was a great feeling having our family back together again. From here on in things started to progress towards Abi leaving the MBU; a person from Home-Start, a UK family support charity, Abi’s Health Visitor and the CPN (Community Psychiatric Nurse) were now attending the weekly meeting in the MBU to prepare for Abi coming home full time. The average stay in a mother & baby unit can vary somewhere around 6 to 7 weeks, Abi spent about 11 weeks. At our final meeting we were told that with the severity that Abi had experienced, she would be kept on the venlafaxine for at least 9 months; I didn’t care as long as I had my wife back but there was also that warning shot again about bi-polar, it would be a waiting game over the next year to see if Abi had any more episodes, if she did we would have to revisit the possibility of Abi being put on lithium.

## **Returning Home**

When we finally got to come home for good, it felt the right time, for sure I had my concerns but we had support and ‘Home-start’ were fantastic, Abi had been assigned a named volunteer, who would come round for up to 3 hours a week and take Abi and John out for a walk to town or the park etc. building up her ability to cope, her confidence. The health visitor was popping in to see Abi as well and she had a CPN visit once or twice a week but these soon faded out and we were left having monthly meetings at the local community mental health centre. These meetings were ok and generally about checking all was going to plan.

I’d taken the first week they were back at home, off work as holiday and remember the following week having to return back to work and leave Abi & John on their own

for the first time for ages. Having been through everything so far, I was really worried that everything would be ok, the CPN would visit Abi during the morning and I could make it back if Abi needed. I was dying to phone her up to check if everything was alright but didn't, there would be times in the future where I would be working away from home and so I had to give her this time, and in fact Abi phoned me at about midday to tell me about the CPN visit, all was ok. It took a long time for those sorts of worries to leave me because as I'd seen through this whole journey, things could change suddenly. Abi only had another couple of visits from the CPN at home.

Abi was doing much better in the following months since the MBU, going to a number of different baby groups and utilising 'Sure Start centres'. She would still question a lot and have loads of doubts about her ability, but this can only be expected after everything she'd been through. Then one day she said to me, "I feel much better today", I didn't think much of it and replied, "that's good" but soon realised that Abi's mood had raised slightly, the dread that rushed through my body again, the worry, even the bi-polar question. I talked to Abi, "now don't jump at me, but I think your mood is running slightly higher than normal". So, here was Abi feeling better than she had and I was telling her that it wasn't right! She wasn't that happy as she looked across at me but she did think about it and then even agreed with me; in a way this was a relief that she could understand when she wasn't right; I phoned up the crisis team who said for her to take a small dose of lorazepam and it wasn't long until it was getting back to normal. Abi had a scheduled meeting with the psychiatrist already booked due within the next couple of days, and at that we discussed what had happened, Abi was on the maximum dose of Venlafaxine and it was agreed to reduce this by a small amount, starting immediately.

I had grown to be acutely aware of Abi's moods and due to that small episode, I decided to revisit my graph and started again to plot her moods for the time after the MBU and see if there was any pattern that would emerge, linked to her periods or changes in medication and so I highlighted these on the graph as well; again it proved invaluable to me for my understanding and especially when discussing it. We did see it again but the 'normal' time in between was getting longer and this moment wasn't so pronounced. Every time we'd speak to the crisis team or psychiatrist and we'd lower the Venlafaxine dose and everything would settle again and for a longer period.

I was still concerned about the possibilities of bi-polar and lithium, so phoned up the MBU to see if I could discuss it with the consultant. The unit got back to me and said we were more than welcome and an appointment was made. Abi and I had discussed the possibilities of bi-polar before, but she certainly didn't want to come to the meeting, instead just wanting me and her brother to go. I took my graph down again to run through Abi's episodes since and following the MBU, the consultant was fantastic and very open to examining the graph and hearing my account and worries even explaining the whole lithium option again. It was from discussing the graph that he agreed he was happy to try weaning Abi off the venlafaxine completely and seeing what would happen, with the hope that everything continued to get better. Leaving that meeting with Peter I was much happier.

From my layman's perspective and no medical background, I was trying to understand it from my logical engineering view. I saw it as the balance of Abi's hormones all over the place, when you consider that Abi had carried John for 9½

months and over that time there's a continual change to her hormones levels, changes that add up over the time but the key is that it's a slow change, then as John is born there's a massive and sudden change, add on top of that the lack of sleep, the anaemia, etc. and surely it must have had an effect. So wasn't this pattern the result of Abi's body getting its balance back to where it was before John was even conceived? It seemed to be taking the same sort of time in months as the pregnancy. If it was, then was the venlafaxine actually driving Abi higher at certain points as her body re-balanced?

It was around this time that I happened to be talking to a man who knew both of us and he was asking how Abi was and the little one. I told him that she'd had a hard time but was coming through it. He said he'd suffered from depression and had used venlafaxine as well, but that it had an adverse effect on him, whilst on it he'd had spates of high moods, I was now even more interested, I had to ask him, "which anti-depressant were you on?" and again he replied, "venlafaxine!" "Could my theory with Abi be right?" It was good that she'd been on it because it had been very effective but now, maybe it was the right time to try and wean her off.

Following on from the discussion with the consultant at the MBU and also discussing it with the local community health team psychiatrist it was agreed to wean Abi off the medication, my only request was to do it slowly, to allow Abi's body to re-adjust each time. To be honest I was still very nervous of any reversal and in our case this is not one of those illnesses that you suddenly wake up one day and shout for joy because it's all over.

The psychiatrist Abi had been seeing the last few times at the local centre had moved on and so Abi's appointments were changed over to another, "fair enough" I thought. Our first meeting with the new one was interesting to say the least, things were going ok but Abi was still fragile and it's a slow journey to building confidence again, we sat in her office talked through how Abi was coping at home in life etc. and then the psychiatrist said, "now, I can see you're overweight, and you need to think about getting that off", it was meant completely matter of fact but Abi was instantly hurt and I was fuming inside, it was too much to be putting extra pressure on her shoulders, it was as if she didn't realise Abi had been through hell and back! We knew she was overweight from the long stay in the MBU, from all the good meals I might add, but we'd get there and with Abi now at home and walking with John all over the place, she was getting good exercise. In the car on the way home, I had to try and shrug it off and keep Abi's confidence being built rather than broken!

It was late March 2007, over 9 months after John was born and we were going on our first holiday down to Cornwall, very exciting; I'd booked a beautiful self-catering cottage, it was lovely. The day after we'd arrived I remember Abi saying to me "I feel really great", there they were again, the four little words and instantly the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and a thought of "what do I do if something happens here? And it's the weekend again!" it would take a number of hours to get home. I was right and Abi knew it as soon as I mentioned it; those words always seemed to be said when things were not ok and there was a certain amount of apprehension from both of us. I looked at the graph again this occurrence was sooner than I would have expected for another and higher than the other couple beforehand, it threw me a little and heightened my worry again. Even though we were now under the local psych

team back home, I phoned the Mother and Baby unit, I felt a lot happier with them. They had one of their doctors phone me straight back, again they were brilliant; I talked through what was happening, he arranged for me to pick up a prescription for a small dose of lorazepam at a local chemist and during the day everything had settled down again and following on, we actually had a great holiday.

I was still thinking about the graph though and why this episode didn't lie in the pattern I would have expected. The reason I think it didn't, was because of the excitement building up to going on holiday, Abi's body was on a natural high, as anyone would be going on holiday and that along with her body rebalancing and the venlafaxine was enough to start this higher mood.

Over the following months Abi was weaned off the venlafaxine and I followed the plan from the local psychiatric team, in our case I think it was lowering the dose and keeping that dose for 4 weeks, then lowering again for another 4 weeks, except for when we got right to the end, I wanted Abi to come off so slowly, so when we got to one tablet a day and had kept that going for 4 weeks we were supposed to just stop but decided Abi would take half a tablet a day for 3 more weeks and finally half a tablet every other day for a couple of weeks. We had told our local team we were going to do it and they were ok about it.

There you have it Abi was finally off the medication and it was now just a waiting game. In my mind if I thought about it I would worry about seeing another episode, so again it was about just going about our life day by day. I thought that if Abi was well for another year and half I'd be able to say that we'd done the right thing. Funnily enough though, much later on when you finally realise that you've both stop talking about it, that's the day!

We both came through this and stronger for it, no more children though, for obvious reasons but that was our decision, other sufferers have gone on to have a second and been looked after and done extremely well. Abi has regained all the confidence lost and more. She has looked after John second to none and done so much with him as he's grown up; he's learnt so much from her. He is a bright young lad who we both adore and who is very confident, well rounded and started school a year ago, completely unaware and unaffected by anything that happened. I look back over this whole experience, very proud of Abi and our families.

It showed the importance of having a support network and I'm eternally grateful to those who helped us along the way, especially our families, our local surgery, our midwife and health visitors and the staff and consultant of the Mother & Baby Unit. The willingness of the MBU consultant to allow me to question things and to discuss details, even when we were no longer under their care was second to none and I think made a huge difference to the outcome.

I hope that by writing my story, I can give hope to those people and families experiencing it but also more importantly to raise the awareness amongst others, medical or otherwise and to highlight the necessity of Mother & Baby units and their specialist teams for mothers suffering from post natal illnesses and where rapid admission can be so vital in aiding a full and lasting recovery.

The last thing worth saying again is that this is my story, a unique set of circumstances to us, as with each case, but there may well be lots of similarities. Also remember that this is an illness and can be successfully treated.