

FROM DARKNESS TO THE *light*.

As a journalist for more than a decade, Victorian mother-of-two Erin Delahunty, 33, has told hundreds of stories. But it's her own story – of vanishing into the darkness of postnatal depression, and clawing her way back to the light – that she wants to share.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning in June, 2008. The sun was streaming through the sash window of the picture-perfect cottage in the idyllic street in a small town in rural Victoria.

And it was pin-drop quiet, save for the occasional lawn mower in the far-off distance and a strange sound from inside the house; a whimpering. My whimpering.

A previously vivacious, happy and powerfully-in-control woman, I lay twisted and curled on the floor in the corner of the kitchen, beneath the window. My pathetic, exhausted weeping was the crying of someone all out of tears. At the end.

The debris of last night's dinner, shrivelled pieces of corn and shards of broken, uncooked pasta stuck to my tear-stained cheeks as I pushed my face hard into the floorboards, wanting to disappear into them.

In my eerily untrembling, outstretched right hand I held the biggest knife from the nearby knife block.

The urgent, hateful voice in my head told me again and again how useless I was: "You can't even do this right. They'll all be better off without you".

This is me, suffering severe, undiagnosed postnatal depression. This is PND. This is what it looks like. It's real and it's happening in homes all over Australia, every day. Of course, I didn't know I was depressed at the time. I just thought I was going insane. And that I was an awful mother.

PND affects about 16 per cent of new mothers in Australia – but remains a great unspoken, widely seen as simply "not coping". It often goes unrecognised, undiagnosed and untreated.

Like many before me, I not only hid my symptoms – I simply didn't know what they were.

A little over a month before my rock-bottom moment in the kitchen, my husband of three years, Brad and I had welcomed our first child. We named him Darcy and he arrived after a stress-free pregnancy, difficult labour and eventual emergency Caesarean after a textbook "cascade of intervention" at a conservative hospital.

Although I had a history of mild depression, the risk of PND never came up in pre-natal care. Not once.

I was like every other first-time mother; I was going to have the perfect baby with my perfect husband and have the perfect life. →

THE JOURNEY CAN BE CHALLENGING & SCARY - ALWAYS ASK FOR HELP.

PND wasn't on my radar. I'd never read an article about it, never seen a story on a current affairs program.

Having carved out a successful career in journalism and PR before falling pregnant quickly after deciding to have children, I assumed I would cope. I didn't even consider not.

I wasn't one of those women who thought it would be easy and it would be my calling, but I certainly wasn't prepared for the utterly life-changing nature of becoming a mother. But this is not unusual in a society where the first newborn a woman ever holds is often her own.

In the days after Darcy's birth, I was an ideal new mother, doting on my gorgeous, healthy bundle and breastfeeding with ease. The midwives at the hospital marvelled at how 'easy' it all was going to be for me. It was when we got home things starting slipping.

While most sleep-deprived new mothers will fall asleep at the drop of a hat, I found myself unable to sleep when Darcy did. I became increasingly obsessed with his routine, despite the continual support of my husband, Brad and immediate family, who visited frequently, although they didn't live in the same town.

I cried uncontrollably, continually and without reason. I became fixated on getting it 'right' and the bad job I perceived I was doing. I was a high-functioning go-getter. How could I not just do this, like everyone else?

Darcy was thriving and on reflection, I realise he was a pretty

great sleeper from early on. I wasn't just tired, it wasn't the baby blues everyone talks about. This was something different, but I had no idea what. I didn't know what being a new mum felt like after all.

The dread of nightfall was the worst.

From about 3pm every day, I could 'feel' it getting darker outside and I knew the tough bit, of feeding, bathing and settling Darcy, was coming and I would become increasingly anxious, to the point of not being able to function.


After a while that feeling of the sun setting and it getting progressively darker outside, was how I felt all the time.

I couldn't see things in the distance. When I drove my car, no matter the time, I always put the headlights on, because it felt dark. It was dark; in my mind.

Looking back at photos of the time, I can pick the stage of my condition by my "dead eyes" in the photos. I wasn't there.

I confided in Brad, who of course knew I wasn't coping. He urged me to see someone.

I saw a GP, I saw a maternal and child nurse, a lactation consultation. I told them how desperate I felt, about the darkness. I was told it was normal. "You'll be fine," they said. One even patted my hand like you'd expect a nurse to pat a dementia patient's hand. So I gave up asking. I retreated back into the darkness. I was resigned to it swallowing me whole. I had no joy in my son, just sadness.



Several weeks passed and my condition worsened. Only my Brad's constant Googling prompted me to visit a different doctor in town, who suspected immediately I had PND, prescribed anti-depressants and booked another appointment for a few days' time.

But it was too late.

That Saturday, Brad had taken Darcy for a big walk in the pram to give me a break. I was meant to be resting.

I'd been thinking about suicide for several days – mainly in the early hours while feeding Darcy, with tears streaming down my face – and it had given me a great sense of calm, which is utterly terrifying to think about now.

When I heard the front door open, I stopped and rushed to Brad, letting it all out, telling him everything.

He called Lifeline on one mobile and handed it me, then called the doctor I'd seen days before on another, insisting most forcefully that he help, then and there. And he did. Those two men – and a mother's love for another little man – saved my life that day.

I was admitted to the local hospital that night, before being transferred to a specialist mother and baby psychiatric unit in Werribee, where mums and bubs are admitted together for treatment.

I was so ill at the time and so desperate for help, I didn't realise there were no hanging points in the unit, that there were no locks

on doors – expect the front one – and that nurses did rounds to check patients hadn't "done a runner." I was very, very sick. But I wanted the help. And I got better.

I responded well to group and one-on-one therapy and medication and was released several weeks later, with a thorough after-care plan and support. I was able to reduce my medication – and eventually come off it entirely – and even had another son, Finn, in 2012.

And that's what I want women – and their partners and friends and families – to know. It. Does. Get. Better. You are not alone, it's not your fault and it's not a sign of weakness. And while it feels like it's entirely related to you as a mother, it's not. It's an illness.

If you had a broken leg, you would do whatever the doctor said to fix it. The same must go for mental illness. It can be diagnosed. It can be treated. It will get better. I promise.

And as I walk in the light through life with my beautiful boys, I don't recognise that broken, twisted girl on the kitchen floor. But I remember her and the darkness that surrounded her. I just wish she had of asked for help sooner.

If you or someone you know is suffering from PND, please call PANDA on 1300 726 306, Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636, Lifeline on 13 11 14 or contact your local GP ♦

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GETTING HELP IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS A WONDERFUL FUTURE.