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Founded 1905

MONDAY, April 9, 2007



**FATHERS' FEARS**  
Coping with postpartum depression  
LIFE, ETC.



LOVE 'CSI'?  
LOOK INTO  
THIS JOB  
BUSINESS MONDAY



"I thought I'd lost my wife. I thought her brain had snapped and there was some heavy damage there."

ALEX BAMBRIDGE  
ON HIS WIFE, ELISABETH'S,  
POSTPARTUM PSYCHOSIS

HELP FOR DAD: Alex Bambridge had to look for support when his wife, Elisabeth, began to suffer from postpartum psychosis after the birth of their baby, Madeleine. PAUL E. RODRIGUEZ, THE REGISTER

# Daddy's baby blues

Fathers often shoulder the weight of a new mother's postpartum depression.

BY THERESA WALKER  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

It started that Sunday last July when Alex and Elisabeth Bambridge planned to attend a barbecue with friends.

Alex looked forward to a chance to relax and have fun after all they had gone through before and after their baby, Madeleine's, premature birth at 7 1/2 months in mid-June.

Only, Elisabeth didn't want to go. She just didn't feel right. But she couldn't describe exactly what it was.

Later that afternoon, while a friend visited their home in Orange, Elisabeth went upstairs to nurse the baby. She called out in a panic for Alex. He found her gasping for breath, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands.

She frantically told Alex she was so scared about the baby, so scared about everything. It didn't make sense. He calmed Elisabeth and got her into the car, intending to take her to the hospi-

tal after dropping the baby off with her mom.

Only Elisabeth didn't want to go to the hospital. She teetered back and forth between an exhausted calm and a manic anxiety, eventually falling asleep at her mother's house.

The roller-coaster ride of that day became the defining rhythm of their lives for the next few weeks.

It turned out that Elisabeth suffered from postpartum psychosis – the outer extreme of postpartum illnesses that can occur in early motherhood.

Left to deal with his wife's condition, the baby's care, his job and maintaining their household, Alex suffered, too. Only he didn't realize it until weeks later, when he found himself bouncing between his own bouts of tears, anger and emotional numbness.

The couple both got help from a postpartum treatment program at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, where Madeleine was born.

**MORE ON LIFE 10**  
Where to turn for help and info about postpartum disorders.

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## FATHERS

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For Elisabeth, help came in the form of hospitalization, medication and months of individual and group therapy.

Alex regained his equilibrium by attending a therapy group specifically for dads.

The Bambridges also were fortunate to have the support of extended family and members of their church.

But Alex had to ask for and accept help, something men in his situation are typically reluctant to do.

"Alex is a good example of someone who could see he was in the middle of it as well, and that it was not just about Elisabeth," says Vivianna Schilpp, a licensed clinical social worker with St. Joseph who provides individual and group therapy for the postpartum program.

"I would love to see more men do that - to participate, ask questions, be honest about how it affects them and admit that they don't know what to do when she falls apart."

The dads can become depressed and angry over what's happened to their families. They can physically exhaust themselves.

The dads' first inclination is to fix it - a common male response. But they don't know how.

"They take on this tremendous role, especially initially," Schilpp says. "There is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about postpartum depression, and if he doesn't have a place to ask questions and talk about how it's affecting him, there often is a huge strain on a marriage."

### MORE THAN BLUE

The exact cause of postpartum depression is not known.



PAUL E. RODRIGUEZ, THE REGISTER

**A FAMILY AFFAIR:** Unlike many men in his circumstances, Alex Bambridge sought help when his wife, Elisabeth, struggled to cope with postpartum psychosis after the birth of their daughter, Madeleine. He received individual counseling and attended a support group for fathers at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange. Hospitalization, therapy and medication helped Elisabeth recover.

### Postpartum resources

Here are some sources of information and help with postpartum disorders for moms and dads:

- Caring for Women With Maternal Depression Program, St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, 714-771-8101
- Postpartum Support International, 800-944-4773 or [www.postpartum.net](http://www.postpartum.net), includes support groups and outreach in Orange County.
- Mental Health America (formerly National Mental Health Association), [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org) or 800-969-6642
- "The Postpartum Husband: Practical Solutions for Living With Postpartum Depression" by Karen Kleiman (2001, Xlbris Corp.)

and prescribed Zoloft in addition to her Ativan.

Back home, she needed and wanted everything to remain calm. Madeleine, cared for by Alex and his in-laws, rarely cried, but when she did Elisabeth became anxious. Her condition worsened and, referred by a friend, she got an appointment with Schilpp at St. Joseph.

Alex, a corporate trainer and coach for Sprint, describes himself as being emotionally numb, detached and unable to concentrate. He was going to work every day, taking care of the house, taking care of the baby.

He didn't want to take family leave because it would mean a reduction in pay.

Friends would call and ask how things were going and he'd respond as if giving a newscast. "It was like I was talking about somebody else," he says.

ed help.

"I would just cry while I was driving alone," he says. "And I couldn't make simple decisions. I was constantly distracted. I was living on adrenaline, jittery."

He'd wake from nightmares charged up and mentally exhausted at the same time.

Alex got counseling from Schilpp over a three-week period and then attended the group therapy for dads once a month for three months.

Schilpp suggested he go for a run every morning so he could sleep better at night, and to write down his feelings about the day before going to bed so he could slow his mind.

Schilpp says the men in the group may have different experiences but share common feelings: "They don't understand why their wife is feeling this way, why she can't cope with having the baby, why there is so much anxiety."

Researchers suspect such factors as changes in a woman's hormonal balance, family support, a history of depression, and stressful life events during and after childbirth.

An estimated 50 percent to 80 percent of women will suffer from the so-called baby blues, according to the National Institutes of Health. Symptoms include mild depression, loss of appetite and difficulty sleeping.

About 10 percent to 15 percent of women will develop more serious postpartum depression during or just after the first year following childbirth, sometimes as soon as a few days later. Treatment typically involves antidepressant medication and/or counseling.

Elisabeth Bambridge, 28, was among the 1 percent of mothers with postpartum psychosis. It usually strikes within two to three weeks after childbirth, swiftly and severely. Symptoms can include delusions, hallucinations, anxiety, paranoia and frantic energy.

Her pregnancy had gone well until she developed toxemia and gestational diabetes at six months along. She was placed on a strict diet and then complete bed rest.

Doctors delivered the baby by Caesarean section June 12. Madeleine, red-haired and blue-eyed like her mother, remained hospitalized for six weeks.

"It was draining for the both of us," Alex, 30, says of his wife's and baby's hospital stays. "It was up and down for us."

Madeleine came home

healthy and things were fine until that first night of Elisabeth's high anxiety.

The Bambridges went to a general practitioner who told her that it was new-mom jitters and she just needed to calm down, the couple says. The doctor prescribed Ativan, an anti-anxiety drug.

It wasn't enough.

Her panic attacks continued, and the next night, spent again at her mother's house, she roused Alex with what he describes as a horrific scream.

In the living room, he found Elisabeth riding his 73-year-old mother-in-law's back. Elisabeth screamed at Alex when she saw him, "Get away, get away, get away!" She scratched and clawed as he tried to hold her and calm her down.

They called 911. Elisabeth told police and paramedics she thought she might kill herself — her desperate attempt, she says, to get help. They took her to the emergency room at St. Joseph, where doctors medicated her.

Alex won't forget the sight of the euphoric smile on Elisabeth's face as a security guard waited outside her door.

"I thought I'd lost my wife. I thought her brain had snapped and there was some heavy damage there."

There was no room at St. Joseph in the postpartum ward, so Elisabeth was placed in the psychiatric ward of a Huntington Beach hospital for 24 hours. A psychiatrist diagnosed her with extreme anxiety disorder, the couple says,

Merely a day passed after Elisabeth's appointment with Schilpp when she had to be hospitalized again. This time there was room at St. Joseph. That night in the waiting room, Alex broke down and couldn't stop sobbing.

### BACK TO NORMAL

Diagnosed with postpartum psychosis, Elisabeth was given an anti-anxiety drug, Klonopin, which worked almost immediately, easing her anxiety. When she went home, it was with instructions to only spend time playing with and enjoying Madeleine for a few hours a day — no diaper changing, no feeding, no housework.

Members of their church, the Central Orange Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, came in shifts to help Alex, his sister-in-law and his mother-in-law manage the baby and the household.

Elisabeth got individual and group therapy through St. Joseph's postpartum depression program. Schilpp helped her understand that part of what may have brought on her condition was the multiple traumas she experienced at 17 — including the death of both her father and grandfather.

She also saw how the problems during her pregnancy and the baby's premature birth and hospitalization helped fuel her fears.

"I wasn't depressed in the slightest," Elisabeth says, adding that she also never heard voices or had hallucinations. "I was just incredibly anxious."

Even as Elisabeth improved, Alex realized he need-

They talk about the back-and-forth nature of the mother's condition, how sometimes she needs him and sometimes not. They talk about the frustration over not being able to rule out getting a call in the middle of the day saying, "I can't take this anymore."

"It becomes very disruptive for the man's life as well to have this turmoil in the middle of the day when they're at work," Schilpp says.

They learn to find time for themselves and start to recuperate, she says.

By the time his parents arrived in August from England, where Alex was born and raised, both Elisabeth and Alex were feeling and acting more like their old selves.

Alex began crying during a belated baby shower thrown by friends as he tried to thank everyone for all their help. But they weren't tears of anguish.

"My dad had to kind of say to everyone, 'It's OK, don't worry,' and finish my sentence for me," Alex says. "From that point on I kind of felt like I was returning to who I was."

Alex Bambridge will be running in the WalkAmerica event April 29 at Fashion Island in Newport Beach to benefit research sponsored by the March of Dimes. His goal is to raise \$2,500 toward preventing premature births like that of his daughter Madeleine, birth defects and infant mortality.

For more information, go to [www.walkamerica.org/madeleineb](http://www.walkamerica.org/madeleineb).

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