



The Hidden Struggle of Perinatal Anxiety

A Case Study of Maya





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AT A GLANCE

CHALLENGES

- Lack of comprehensive PMADs education
- Lack of meaningful screening and investment in mental health supports

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Shift societal stigma about PMADs and help-seeking
- Improve screening, monitoring, and access to high-quality supports (e.g., therapy)

ABOUT THE STUDY

This research is based on in-depth interviews with 17 caregivers across the U.S. who experienced perinatal mood and anxiety disorders.

Maya's Story

Maya, a first-time mother and university administrator, faced unexpected postpartum anxiety (PPA) despite her awareness of perinatal mood disorders (PMADs). Though she had prepared for potential postpartum depression, she was blindsided by the intensity of her anxiety and the lack of proactive medical support. Her experience underscores the gap in postpartum mental health education, the limitations of screening tools, and the urgent need for more comprehensive postpartum care.

Maya participated in our recent study on perinatal mental health and brought a wealth of insight into the experiences of caregivers experiencing perinatal anxiety. With her permission, we highlight her story.

“I knew about postpartum depression. I didn’t know anxiety was its own thing. And I had no idea how it would manifest in me.”

Maya knew she had a predisposition for anxiety and depression. She had experienced it in graduate school, during her dissertation, and in high-pressure work situations. But even with this awareness, she was unprepared for how postpartum anxiety would present itself.

Maya's labor lasted over 18 hours, culminating in a birth experience that left her feeling dismissed by medical staff. "I remember my OB commenting at the end, 'Oh, I thought I'd miss my dinner plans, but I still made it in time.' That set the tone for the care I received."

Her six-week postpartum visit felt just as transactional. ***"It was like a checklist: physical exam, okay, you're fine, move on. No one asked about my mental health. Or if they did, I don't remember because it wasn't meaningful."***

In hindsight, Maya realized that her postpartum anxiety had begun almost immediately. She fixated on worst-case scenarios, felt constant dread, and struggled to sleep even when her baby was resting. ***"I was terrified to take my son out of the house. I imagined every possible thing that could go wrong."*** In order to function, she and those around her dismissed her struggles with postpartum anxiety. She recalls thinking, ***"It's like normal, like, 'Oh, new parent, anxious,' but it's a real thing."***



"Even with a very educated support system in my life, we really weren't aware... I wish someone had told me that postpartum anxiety existed. That I wasn't just 'overthinking.'"

Supports & Gaps

Because she lacked exposure to postpartum anxiety narratives, Maya rationalized her fears as typical new-parent concerns. ***“I thought I was just being extra cautious. That it was normal to be hyper-vigilant.”***

But when her best friend (a medical professional) called her husband and urged him to check in, Maya realized something was deeply wrong. ***“She saw what I couldn’t. She knew I wasn’t okay.”***

“In countries like the UK, midwives visit new moms multiple times in the first few months. Here, I had one rushed checkup at six weeks, and that was it.” The absence of structured follow-up left Maya to navigate postpartum anxiety largely on her own until, with the help of her friend, she sought therapy.

Her husband took two weeks of leave, which was more than many fathers received but still far from sufficient. ***“His boss acted like two weeks was generous. It wasn’t. I needed more help, but we just had to make do.”*** Maya, her partner, and their child would have benefitted greatly from workplace supports that were non-judgmental and accommodating.

“I think it's that sense of we all grew up in an age where we did have to do it alone... How do you ask for help when you're not used to asking for help because you've always been told that you can't ask for help?”



Future Directions

Maya's story highlights the inadequacy of current postpartum mental health screenings.

"I took the postpartum depression questionnaire at my son's checkups. I knew how to answer so they wouldn't flag me. The questions don't capture anxiety."

Research supports this. Standard postpartum depression screening tools often fail to detect anxiety, leading to underdiagnosis and lack of intervention (Fairbrother et al., 2019).

Maya's experience also reflects systemic gaps in postpartum care. The absence of structured follow-up left Maya to navigate postpartum anxiety largely on her own.

In order to improve outcomes for birthing and non-birthing caregivers facing perinatal anxiety, we need:

- More public awareness and education about PPA
- Frequent, comprehensive screening, especially for PPA
- To shift societal narratives that discourage help-seeking
- Systems of family leave that allow caregivers adequate paid time off

Dedicating more funding to support caregivers experiencing PPA could:

- Improve routine screening, postpartum check-ins, and access to therapy resources
- Support earlier intervention, improved caregiver mental health, and greater workforce retention

The Bottom Line

Maya's experience highlights the need for a paradigm shift in postpartum care - a shift that prioritizes both mental and physical recovery and ensures that new parents are truly seen and supported.

References:

Fairbrother, N., Janssen, P., Antony, M. M., Tucker, E., & Young, A. H. (2019). Perinatal anxiety disorder prevalence and incidence. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 245, 357-366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2018.11.015>

About Nested

At Nested, we're committed to advancing family well-being through rigorous, impactful research. As a specialized 501(c)(3) nonprofit institute with deep expertise in child development, perinatal mental health, and parenting, **we are accelerating the research-to-action pipeline.**

Methodology

This case study is part of *Missed Screenings, Missed Support*, a national study on perinatal mental health. As part of the research, we conducted one-on-one interviews with caregivers across the United States, each lasting up to two hours. These conversations explored their personal experiences with perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, capturing the challenges, support systems, and moments that shaped their journeys.

All names used in this case study are pseudonyms. Any identifying information has also been changed to protect caregiver privacy.



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