

# A patient's story

Tricia Adams

I am a qualified psychiatric nurse (RMN 1989), currently working as a researcher at a London teaching hospital, in the psychiatric department of the medical school. I have a BA (Hons) degree and completed a Master's degree in Mental Health Studies in 1995.

In 1979, at the age of 18, I suffered a psychotic breakdown, but recovered well once I was given antipsychotic medication. In 1993 I became pregnant; during the pregnancy, having gradually come off medication for the first time, I suffered a relapse of my original illness. I was hospitalised twice, in total for a period of just over two months, and received a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Again, I made a rapid recovery and went back to work in January 1994. I have received a great deal of support from my husband, who is also a qualified psychiatric nurse, from our families and from several very good friends.

However, July to October 1993, before my baby was born and for the first two weeks of her life, was a living nightmare for me because of the psychosis, and is a chapter of my life that I will never forget. The main delusional beliefs that haunted me continually were that Graham (my partner then, now my husband), had poisoned me and my unborn baby while we were still living with him at home. I needed constant reassurance once I had left home that we were both healthy and would survive whatever he had done to us, but, unfortunately, I could never find this.

I stayed in various locations once I had left home, in some with friends, in others with people who had never met me previously. Initially, when I arrived at each home, my hosts seemed welcoming and friendly, but after a day or two I realised, in my paranoid state, that they too were attempting to poison me and heard them plotting against me. I did not explain this to them, but I did leave each place that I stayed at fairly rapidly, through fear of being killed.

Two months after leaving home I was admitted to hospital. I began to believe that Graham was the devil and the nurses, doctors, social workers and patients at the hospital were witches and devil-worshippers, all supporting Graham in his efforts to kill me and the baby.

Everywhere I went I continually heard people whispering and talking about Graham and my sister (I did not know where she was and I

thought Graham had killed her). I was able to read people's thoughts, or so I thought, due to a special power that the poison had given me. I heard people muttering about me being evil and being "on trial"; that I had killed Graham and poisoned myself.

I believed that the patients on the ward were all actors, put on the ward to watch me and confuse me, and make a sacrifice of me to the devil. However hard I tried, I seemed unable to convince anyone that I had committed no crime, that it was Graham who had destroyed us. Night-time was worst; I could not sleep and wandered endlessly around the ward, wrapped in a blanket, believing that at any moment I would drop down dead, or explode like a time bomb.

I believed that everybody was aware of my plight, since I knew, in my psychotic state, that my story had been written in the daily papers and shown on television programmes, in subtle ways, throughout each day's viewing. Every magazine I read had names and places and coded numbers in it, alluding to myself and Graham. Everywhere I looked, people's faces were brighter in colour and sharper in contour than they usually seemed, and I realised that this was because they were evil.

I have never felt so alone in my life before, or so frightened. The situation I found myself in seemed unbelievable in that I felt powerless. I had no one to talk to or confide in and could not trust anyone. I did not talk about most of my delusional beliefs or hallucinations with anyone as I believed them to be real, and not delusional; I was not prepared to talk to people who I knew were wanting to kill me and my baby, about the fact that I was aware they were out to get me.

Throughout my time away from home I was interviewed fairly regularly by a variety of psychiatric registrars and social workers. They asked me if I was hallucinating, and I answered "no"; as far as I was concerned the voices I was hearing were real, and not hallucinations. They asked me if I was experiencing ideas of reference, and I said "no"; I knew that the continual references to myself on the television and in magazines were there for everyone to see and hear, and were not a symptom of madness.

I have since been told by my family and by Graham that I appeared to other people at the time (most of whom had never met me before)

as hostile and difficult to deal with. Most of the mental health professionals who met me consequently assumed that I was exhibiting some kind of behavioural or personality disorder and had no idea that I was psychotic and depressed. It is fairly obvious to see in retrospect, I think, that my apparent hostility and change in personality/behaviour can be explained by my terror, loneliness and feelings of powerlessness, and as I saw it, by my desperate fight for the survival of myself and my unborn baby.

I was given a Depixol injection one week after Rhea's birth. The following week I began to realise that I had been depressed for a long time, and a week later I began to realise that many of the things I had thought were happening were not real at all. I gradually stopped hallucinating and talked to Graham about my newly gained insight. It was a tremendous relief to be able to talk about my experiences and know that I did not need to fight to survive any longer.

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