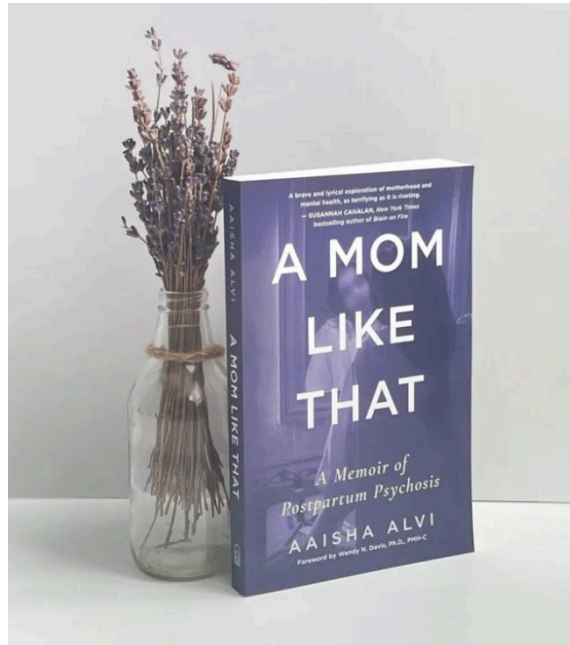


Experiencing and Speaking About Postpartum Psychosis:

An Interview with Aaisha Alvi

by Clinical Psychologist Gülşah Yavuz



Motherhood is often spoken about in terms of love, bonding, and closeness. Although the challenges of the postpartum period are increasingly being discussed, some experiences of motherhood still remain difficult to put into words. In particular, speaking about frightening thoughts involving oneself or one's baby, or about experiences in which one's relationship to reality has changed, can be accompanied by intense feelings of shame and fear of being judged.

Writer and postpartum psychosis awareness advocate Aaisha Alvi shares her own experience of postpartum psychosis in her book *A Mom Like That*. She recounts the psychosis that first emerged after becoming a mother and later returned following a pregnancy loss, alongside her search for help, treatment, and recovery. Today, Alvi works to raise awareness of postpartum psychosis and to help women who experience it access the support they need. She also volunteers with Postpartum Support International (PSI).

While reading *A Mom Like That*, one of the questions that stood out to me concerned not only the experience of psychological distress itself, but also the conditions that make it possible to speak about such an experience. What happens when a woman says something that does not fit the narrative of motherhood expected of her? What kind of space is available for her to put her experience into words? A diagnosis may give a name to an experience, but how much room remains for the person who lived through it to speak about what that experience meant to her?

In this written interview with Aaisha Alvi, we listen to postpartum psychosis through her own account, discussing the fear of being seen as a “bad mother,” pregnancy loss, the role of families and clinicians, and the importance of creating space for experiences that can still be so difficult to speak about.

In many parts of the world, mothers are afraid to admit that they may have frightening thoughts about harming themselves or their babies after childbirth or pregnancy loss. They are often met with responses such as, "You're a mother," "Try to bond with your baby," or "You shouldn't think such things." Instead of being heard, many are left feeling ashamed or afraid. By writing *A Mom Like That*, you chose to make these experiences visible. What would you say to mothers who are struggling in silence and are afraid that speaking openly will make them seem like "a bad mother"?

I would say there is nothing wrong with struggling with motherhood, it just proves that we are human. And I would encourage those who are struggling to be open about it with those they trust. In the vast majority of cases, those types of thoughts are intrusive thoughts which 90% of parents, both moms and dads, experience in the postpartum period. In a small minority of cases, they can be related to a severe temporary mental illness like postpartum psychosis, which does have a risk of suicide and infanticide when not properly diagnosed and treated. This is why we all need to get over our feelings of shame about how we are doing in the postpartum period. The good news is that such feelings are either completely normal or the symptom of something that is fully treatable. But we will never know unless we can remove the barriers that prevent us from being open about what is happening to us.

One of the most moving parts of your book is the story of Nadia. While you were still in the early stages of your own recovery, you recognized the same symptoms in another mother and tried to help her. Did meeting Nadia change the way you understood your own experience? Did it also shape your decision to write this book? Looking back today, is there something you came to understand about postpartum psychosis or something you wish someone had told you that you hoped other mothers would find through your story?

Meeting Nadia completely changed the way I saw my own illness. Despite my psychiatrist telling me over and over again that what I had was a severe medical condition, it was very hard for me to believe that. This was because the symptoms I experienced, including feeling forced to harm others and hearing what I believed to be the voice of the devil, just made me feel like I must be a bad person.

Seeing Nadia, who was practically a stranger, report similar experiences and respond to these symptoms exactly how I had responded was what finally convinced me that this was indeed an illness that manifests similarly for people. And yes, it definitely shaped my decision to write my book. I initially felt like a monster because of the symptoms I experienced, and that was even why I felt worthy of being dead. I never want any woman struggling with this illness to feel that way - ever. I want mothers to know that this is 1000000000% a medical condition that is treatable and it says nothing about the type of human being or mom you are or will be.

Throughout the book, it is clear how much your spouse and family loved you and how hard they tried to support you. At the same time, it is also clear that they struggled to understand the symptoms you were experiencing. Looking back today, what would you most like to say to the family of a mother experiencing postpartum psychosis?

I would tell families of mothers experiencing this illness to learn about postpartum psychosis. Read stories of women who have experienced it and recovered. This illness is truly unbelievable in what it can do to someone's mind. So educate yourself properly so you can

support your loved one well, advocate for her and not feel hopeless about the prospects of a full recovery.

Throughout your journey, there were moments when you felt your experience was not fully understood by clinicians. For example, after your miscarriage, your symptoms were initially understood primarily as grief. Looking back today, what do you wish clinicians understood better about postpartum psychosis?

I wish physicians knew postpartum psychosis exists, first and foremost. Too many medical providers still don't even know that the condition exists. I want them to know the hallmark symptoms of this condition which are the presence of hallucinations and delusions. They also need to have the humility to refer a patient they are unsure about to someone who specializes in reproductive psychiatry, especially if the patient keeps coming in and is not getting better. I also want them to know that this condition can occur in contexts outside of live births and can occur after stillbirth, pregnancy loss or termination.

The question your daughter Lina asks you at the beginning of your book, "Mom, what does 'insane' mean?", is very powerful. As a mother, what is the thing you most want Lina to learn from this story today?

I want her to learn that postpartum psychosis is a condition that any woman can fall prey to after giving birth, miscarrying or terminating a wanted or unwanted pregnancy. I want her to know that it can become particularly frightening and dangerous when it is not treated, but there is no need to fear it because there is effective treatment for this temporary condition.

While reading your book, I had the following impression. While considerable attention was given to the diagnosis and treatment of your symptoms, it seemed that there was less space for issues such as your cultural background, your faith, what pregnancy loss meant to you, and what becoming a mother meant to you. Because it seems to me that women are expected to embrace motherhood instinctively and to bond with their babies immediately. Do you think postpartum care should make more room, alongside medical treatment, for conversations about the emotional, relational, cultural,

and social meanings of becoming a mother? During your own journey, what made you feel that someone was listening to you, or not listening to you?

I do believe my own psychiatrist did make space for these types of conversations. I couldn't include everything we talked about during the 1-hour sessions she gave me for my appointments in my book!

I fully believe such conversations are so important and allow providers to see their patients as more than the condition they are coming in for help with. Being given a full hour by my psychiatrist allowed her to not only assess if the medications were working, but also gave me the time to explore all of the issues you mentioned. And that is what made me truly feel heard and supported.

Many mothers in Turkey still fear being judged if they speak openly about their mental health after childbirth or pregnancy loss. Some remain silent because they are afraid of being seen as "bad mothers." What would you like to say to them?

Sharing how you feel and what is happening to you postpartum is what will ensure that you can get the help you need if you are suffering from a life-threatening condition like postpartum psychosis. Keeping yourself and your children safe is, to me, the epitome of being a good mother, not a bad one.

To learn more about *A Mom Like That: A Memoir of Postpartum Psychosis* and find out where to purchase the book, you can visit its page on the Dundurn Press website.

[A Mom Like That: A Memoir of Postpartum Psychosis, 2024, Dundurn Press](#)

To learn more about Aaisha Alvi, follow her advocacy work on postpartum psychosis, and explore her writing and other interviews, you can visit her personal website.

[Aaisha Alvi's Official Website](#)