

Andrea Yates: The Dangers of Neglecting a Mother's Mental State

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“Congratulations on giving birth to your beautiful, healthy baby!” Many mothers worldwide have probably heard this statement upon giving birth to their child. While a sense of euphoria comes with bringing new life into the world, that euphoria does not last forever and is often followed by a period of sadness. This sadness can last a few days and, in many cases, is not considered severe. However, what happens when that sadness turns into full-blown depression, and what happens when that depression is neglected? Andrea Yates' case gives us a glimpse of the worst-case scenario and highlights the dangers of neglecting a mother's mental state.

Postpartum Depression

The DSM-5, despite being psychiatry's diagnostic bible, does not seem to pay much attention to postpartum depression being that it isn't listed as its own disorder. Instead, they list it as “a subcategory of major depressive disorder” (Patel et. al., 2012). Psychologists have not been able to identify a single cause for the disorder, but they have identified risk factors that make someone more likely to suffer from PPD. Among these are a history of mental illness, lack of support from the father of the child, lack of social support from the mother's social circle, and stressful life events during pregnancy or within the year of pregnancy.

Symptoms of postpartum depression range from mild to severe. Some symptoms are similar to those of major depressive disorder such as, according to the American Psychiatric Association, “feeling[s] of doubt, guilt, and helplessness, loss of interest in hobbies or usual activities, and recurring thoughts of death which may include thinking about or even planning suicide” (Patel et. al., 2012). However, a large part of postpartum depression is the lack of connection that these mothers have with their children. Some mothers also may suffer from

thoughts and feelings of aggression towards their baby. Around 60% of mothers with PPD have these types of obsessive thoughts. Among these women was Andrea Yates.

Andrea Yates

“Even though she knew it was against the law... she did what she thought was right in the world she perceived through her psychotic eyes at the time.” ~ Phillip Resnick, Yates’ court-appointed psychiatrist (Alacá, 2004)

Andrea Yates presents one of the worst-case scenarios for what happens when postpartum goes ignored as she is one of several mothers who followed through on the delusional yet homicidal thoughts she was having towards her children. In summary, the former mother of five children (7-year-old Noah, 5-year-old John, 3-year-old Paul, 2-year-old Luke, and 6-month-old Mary) drowned them one by one in a bathtub with the hopes of saving them from herself (Spinelli, 2004). Her children did not seem to be developing right in her eyes as they had difficulty managing their behavior. As Andrea puts it, “They did a lot of silly stuff and didn’t obey... They did things God didn’t like” (Alacá, 2004). That’s what her mind was telling her at the time of the crime and that’s the story she echoed throughout her interrogation, trial, and institutionalization. As of right now, she resides in a mental hospital and has no desire to be released as she believes that being incarcerated or institutionalized is her God-given punishment for being a bad mother.

Social Perception of Postpartum Depression and Andrea Yates

One of the most infuriating aspects of postpartum depression is, in my opinion, how society views the disorder. Sure, people are aware of the fact that postpartum depression *is* a form of depression. The thing is that, even with the symptoms in mind, the general public seems

to deem it appropriate to address it similarly to the baby blues. The term “baby blues” is used to describe a relatively common and mild, but still somewhat debilitating form of depression that occurs after childbirth. About 50-85% of mothers will experience the baby blues at some point in their lifetime (Patel et. al., 2012), a prevalence rate way higher than PPD’s 12%.

PPD is criminally underrepresented in media as a whole. For this reason, I applaud shows like *Kotaro Lives Alone* for displaying PPD symptoms on screen. *Kotaro Lives Alone* is a Netflix original anime series that follows a small child who lives in an apartment complex by himself. He used to live with his family in a different area but had to move out since his father was abusive and his mother was no longer around. The show depicts his mother as “purposefully neglectful,” but a more thorough look at the mother’s behaviors shows that they are more reminiscent of someone who is struggling to cope with postpartum.

Kotaro’s mother would try to put on a brave face for her son and show as much love to him as she could. However, as her depressive thoughts consumed her, she found it harder and harder to take care of Kotaro. Eventually, her depressive thoughts rendered her unable to take care of Kotaro, causing her to leave the home. She promised Kotaro that she would come back one day and even left him a large inheritance (which lasted him the entire show) so that he could take care of himself while she was gone. The mischaracterization of Kotaro’s mother is a prominent example of how warped the perception of motherhood is in society. It also allows people to view her in the same way they may view other moms like Kotaro’s. They can apply the common yet incorrect belief that if you show distress when taking care of your children, you must hate your child.

The public perception of Andrea Yates while her case was still ongoing fell in line with the societal perception of most mothers who commit infanticide. Being that mothers are

considered the caretakers of the family, news of infanticide cases tends to spawn two different reactions from the public: “Society is torn between wanting to protect the helpless child [through imposing a heavy sentence on the mother] and recognizing that...the very act of child murder suggests that the mother was severely ill...and therefore deserving of sympathetic sentencing” (Manchester, 2003). Some people, after hearing about Andrea’s case, saw her as a victim of the thoughts that spawned from her postpartum depression. Meanwhile, others viewed her as a merciless killer. Either way, the media attention that her case garnered was enough to paint her as “a poster child for postpartum illness” (Banerji, 2023).

PPD Resources (or lack thereof)

After the courts determined that Andrea was not guilty of her crimes by reason of insanity and sentenced her to a mental institution, the state of Texas created a bill in her name. This bill, called the Andrea Yates Bill, “requires all providers of prenatal care to give new mothers information about resources available to help them with postnatal depression” (McLellan, 2006). Not many people felt strongly against this bill being passed. However, the “discovery of a dearth of relevant resources and organizations” led people to doubt the efficiency of this bill (McLellan, 2006).

The only well-known resource for new mothers is the paid maternity leave that their job may or may not promise them. However, the benefits of maternity leave tend to hinge on how much time a mother can take away from work. A 1997 study concerning how time off from work can affect a mother’s health showed that “[w]ith more than 15 weeks leave, time off work had a positive effect on maternal mental health” (McGovern et. al., 1997). Had Andrea kept the nursing job that she held for nearly a decade, she would have had access to this resource. Unfortunately, after she got married in 1993, she gave up her job before the birth of her first

child (McLellan, 2006). She would then hold the job title of “homeschool teacher” and have no access to maternity leave since her place of work was her own house and her students were her children.

If the family is religious, then their faith can count as a resource for the new mother. However, someone’s willingness to turn to their faith to cope with depressive symptoms often depends on the faith they are a part of. In Andrea’s case, she would have had to turn to the teachings of Michael Wornecki, a misogynistic nondenominational preacher that Russel Yates met in college and has been attached to ever since.

“All women are descendants of Eve, and Eve was a witch” ~ Michael Wornecki, Fundamentalist Preacher (Alacá, 2004)

The lack of religious support is one of the major causes of her downward spiral. Faith was a large part of her life since she grew up in a religious household. Sources say that Andrea Yates was raised in Roman Catholicism (McLellan, 2006). However, there is not much information on the religious practices that took place in Andrea Yates’ childhood home. What we do know is that Catholicism was the basis of her homeschool curriculum for her school-aged children.

Some people turn to their family during times of mental hardship. In my family, it is normal for husbands to take on more household chores and cooking so that the mother can tend to her baby without worrying about what goes on around the house. Mothers helping their daughters take care of the new baby as well as sisters helping sisters also occurs often (and was

how my sisters and I were raised). The reliability of family as a resource, however, depends on who you ask.

In Andrea's case, she had virtually no one. Her mother-in-law was helping Andrea take care of housework while she attempted to tend to her children. On the day of the murders, she remembered seeing Andrea fill up a bathtub and asking her what the reason was. Andrea answered, "In case I needed it." If her mother-in-law had pressed her further on the issue, they could have had discussions on how she could help Andrea manage her mental illness and possibly prevent all 5 murders. Her husband made himself available. However, Russel Yates was not the type of person someone would normally call in this situation. He sought to have as many children as nature would allow as per Wornecki's teachings. Whenever Andrea tried to talk to her husband about her depression, his responses and actions were less than ideal. I believe this quote from him speaks for itself.

"She's got nine kids, teaches her kids T-ball, and she does just fine. I don't know why Andrea's having so much trouble." ~ Russel Yates, referring to a neighbor he had his eye on (Alacá, 2004)

To avoid another case like Andrea Yates' case, members of society need to learn to take postpartum seriously and listen to the concerns of mothers who are suffering from it. It might save the life of that beautiful, healthy baby she's holding in her hands.

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