

Working Together to Support the Mental Health of Families with Preterm Babies

Bronwyn is a 32 year old vet nurse married to IT consultant Barry. They live in an outer Melbourne suburb, with their three year old Oscar and newborn Thomas.

Thomas and his identical twin Harrison were born at 26 weeks. Sadly, Harrison died when he was three weeks old.

Thomas remained in hospital for four months and aside from a short period immediately after Harrison's death, Bronwyn visited daily. Hospital staff noted that she was always immaculately dressed and made-up, wearing a lot of jewellery. It was also remarked that she seemed to be coping well, presenting a *"bright face"*, chatting easily to both the staff and other mothers.

Bronwyn attended some classes designed to help parents learn about caring for a very premature baby. She appeared very motivated to learn as much as she could. During the classes, Bronwyn shared that she regretted having to return to work just a few months after the birth of her first child and hoped she'd be able to stay at home longer this time. The nurse who ran the classes followed up with parents when they took their babies home.

At the first home visit, the nurse noted that Bronwyn's home, just like herself, was immaculate. At this time Bronwyn shared that Thomas had been diagnosed as being profoundly deaf and this was causing her a lot of worry and required a number of medical appointments.

At the three month visit, Bronwyn was quite jittery, spoke quickly, and seemed unable to follow-through with a topic of conversation. She also looked dishevelled and the house was very untidy.

The front of the house was gated-off from the back section, in order to keep Oscar away. However, the little boy was very attention-seeking, rattling the gate and calling out. *"Mummy, mummy... I'm hungry.... Mummy, mummy... I want to go to the park."* Bronwyn said that Oscar had become very naughty since the babies were born. He had been quite destructive, doing things like tearing off strips of wallpaper in his bedroom - strips were hanging down all over the room.

Bronwyn shared that her husband 'didn't seem to understand how much attention Thomas needed and was becoming short-tempered with her about neglecting Oscar. *"He doesn't understand because he's never here, he's always at work. I have to take care of everything, including all of Thomas's medical appointments,"* she said. She reported she wasn't sleeping well and had become quite irritable with friends and family, especially her mother, who had been trying to help her with the children and the house.

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A small area in the back garden had been set up as a memorial to Harrison and Bronwyn became teary when she mentioned this.

Several months later, Bronwyn calls the hospital, when Thomas is about 10 months old. She'd had to return to work due to the family's finances and is experiencing panic attacks on her way to the veterinary surgery every morning. She says she's getting *"terribly anxious during surgical procedures"* and is not coping when she was asked to dispose of animal body parts. *"I can't quit and I don't know what to do,"* she says. She desperately needs help.

Did you know...

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This is a de-identified vignette.

Case study Bronwyn: Working Together to Support the Mental Health of Families with
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