

**Rachel Hudgel**  
**Testimony on H.C.R. No. 16 (Perinatal Mental Health)**  
**House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee**  
**May 7, 2024**

Chair Pavliga, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Brewer and members of the House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify before you here today.

I am both honored and humbled to be able to share my lived experience in hopes that it may show other mothers that they are not alone. I also want to thank Representative Somani and Representative Ray for introducing H.C.R. No. 16.

My name is Rachel Hudgel and I have worked in the psychiatric and addiction field for 10 years, working specifically in local and national business development for the past 8 years. I hold a BA in Psychology from The Ohio State University and an MBA with a concentration in Healthcare Administration from Mount Vernon Nazarene University. I am also in recovery from alcohol and have been for almost 9 years. I used to be able to add that I was successful in my recovery and med-compliant for many years for my Bipolar, Anxiety and Major Depressive Disorder, but as you will learn shortly from my story, I have only been successful with that for the last 7 months. I share these things about myself because I believe it is important for people to understand that perinatal mental health affects everyone, regardless of who you are, where you come from, or how successful you are as a person.

I know my time is brief, so my goal today is to make as much of an impact as I can and tell as much of my story as possible in hopes that it will inspire positive change for perinatal mental health.

I want to start by saying I knew I wanted to be a mother more than anything else in the world. The only way I can even think of describing it is that it was and is a feeling deep in my bones and now it is the core of who I am as a human being. I love my child more than anything in this world and I would walk through fire for her. She is the biggest blessing in my life. But she was also the most traumatic experience in my life. And those are two words you do not ever expect to hear in the same sentence, especially when you talk about the joys of pregnancy and motherhood.

To get pregnant, I had to go off my medications, and so I slowly weaned off my psychiatric medications with the help of my psychiatrist in April of 2022. By August, I was completely off all my medications, and I found out I was pregnant in October. I was feeling good off my medications and thought that it was going to be a breeze. I had been terrified of going off my medication after being med-compliant for 15+ years, but I thought I had no reason to worry anymore.

Six weeks in, my pregnancy hormones hit, and my life completely spiraled out of control. I had feelings and emotions that I had never felt before in my life. Feelings and emotions that were at such extremes that I had no idea how to cope. I began having panic attacks between 10-15 times a day, and no, that's not an exaggeration because I would count every time it happened and wait with dread for the next one. My husband would sit on our bed and hold me as I sobbed and shook in his arms as the next panic attack would pulse through my body. This happened for the entire 9 months of my pregnancy. I was afraid to leave the house. I was afraid to drive. The once independent and strong woman I was, I couldn't even see in the mirror anymore. She wasn't there and I was scared she wasn't coming back.

I felt ashamed even though I knew it was something I could not control. My family was afraid for my safety because I became suicidal. Though I knew I would never hurt myself because I was pregnant and loved my unborn child, I thought every day about dying. I just wanted my suffering to end. All I wanted was my beautiful little girl and the mental anguish I had to go through to have her seemed unbearable. The medications my psychiatrist put me on that were considered low risk with pregnancy did not work with my hormones, and instead, I gained seventy pounds. I had restless legs every night, I was always itchy, and I was nauseas all the time. I hated being pregnant with every fiber of my being. When I went into my OBGYN, she would just tell me to hang in there. That there was nothing she could do. I felt defeated and like nobody cared or understood what I was going through. I felt alone and isolated, and I was.

My daughter came 5 weeks early, which was a miracle because I don't know that I would have been able to hold on anymore. The week prior to her birth, I went to the hospital for mild contractions, and they told me she would come early. They gave me a steroid shot to help grow her lungs faster. I had an allergic reaction to the steroid that put me into a psychosis for several days. There was nothing anybody could do to help me, so I suffered alone, at home, in my husband's arms, in silence.

I made the difficult choice not to breastfeed so that I could immediately go back on my mental health medications and take care of my daughter. You would think that my story would end there, but it didn't. My postpartum was horrific as I slowly weened back onto all my medications.

Two months after my daughter was born, I started having severe abdominal pain in my stomach. I could not go to the bathroom for weeks on end. I was nauseas. I could barely lift my head off the couch. The doctor told me I had appendicitis and yanked my appendix out. I would later find out my appendix was fine and that I didn't need that surgery. My pain persisted. I went in and out of local hospitals 10 different times, scans of all kinds, colonoscopy, endoscopy, every test you can imagine. Nobody could find what was wrong with me. They blamed my mental health. That it was all in my head. Blamed it on having just been pregnant, having just had a baby, the postpartum. They didn't take me seriously and discounted me for being a woman. They said I imagined my pain. Instead of helping me, they treated me as if I were drug seeking and treated me as if I wasn't worth their time.

I ended up getting a superficial thrombosis in my right arm. It moved deeper and they put me on a blood thinner. I decided I could not continue to live this way anymore. I had a daughter to take care of. So, I went to the Cleveland Clinic. A half hour consultation and I was told I had a blood clot in my mesenteric artery. A blood clot in my stomach. I suffered for months in agony, both physically and mentally. What ER Doctors, Gastro Specialists and an Internist could not figure out for months, the Cleveland Clinic figured out in a half hour.

I lost a year of my life. From October 2022 to October 2023, I talked to nobody. I drowned in the darkness of my thoughts and isolation. I feared that I would never feel normal again and that I would never be well. The first 5 months of my daughter's life, I felt "less than", like I wasn't a good mother. I was told to push through it. I was discounted and suffered mentally and physically. Doctors made me feel crazy. They made me feel stupid. They made me feel like I didn't matter. The only doctor that made me feel validated and saved my life was Dr. Daniel Sullivan at the Cleveland Clinic. To him I will always be grateful for giving me my life back, my husband his wife back and my little girl her mother back. She turned 1 this past Saturday and I was well enough to plan her 1st birthday and be part of it.

In testifying today, I want the State of Ohio to understand how complex and complicated the journey of perinatal mental health can be. It's not like the movies where the girl throws up in the bathroom and then the next scene she holds her baby, and her life is flowers and rainbows. It is hard. It is uncomfortable. It is traumatic. It is far from what I ever expected it to be.

I am lucky I am here today. I am blessed to have had an entire support team of family, friends, my boss and place of employment, and psychiatrist that took my broken pieces and put me back together again. Others that have experienced the same story are not so lucky.

So, I leave you with this, suicide is the leading cause of death in the perinatal period (from pregnancy all the way through post-partum). I'm not okay with that and I don't think we as a society should be okay with that either.

Chair Pavliga and members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.