

Postnatal depression became a shared fight for actor Steve Bastoni and his wife, Bianca



Bastoni (right, as Steve Parker) with Nikki Coghill and Kevin Summers on *Neighbours*.



Russell Crowe (left) and Bastoni (right) hang out on *Police Rescue* in 1992.

ROLE PLAYING

Bastoni's film work includes *The Heartbreak Kid*, *Macbeth* and *The Matrix Reloaded*, and his TV turns—mostly playing hard men—take in *Wildside* and *Stingers*.

Baby Roman was just a few weeks old in August 2007, and his parents were on edge. As the newborn slept soundly in their Doncaster, Melbourne home, his father, *Neighbours* actor Steve Bastoni, clattered some cutlery in the kitchen. His fiancée, Bianca Pirotta, berated him for it. “I was very paranoid about making noise,” says Pirotta, 24. “The nurses told me, ‘It’s just the baby blues,’ but it didn’t go away.” She was eventually diagnosed with postnatal depression. Says Bastoni: “The shock of having a child ... suddenly Bianca wasn’t coping with it and I wasn’t coping with it. It was very, very hard on both of us—it was a pretty dark period.”

The couple spent weeks fumbling through sleep deprivation and Pirotta’s depression, which Bastoni describes as “this faceless, nameless monster that was tearing us apart.” It was advice from his brother-in-law Frank (whose wife, Pirotta’s older sister Nikki, had also suffered from postnatal depression) that helped the couple make positive changes. “He said, ‘Look, it’s not just her problem, it’s your family’s problem. It’s up to you to deal with it together,’” says Bastoni, 42, now an ambassador for Lifeline Australia, which offers emotional support via a 24-hour counselling service. “That made sense to me.”

The Bastonis sought treatment at the Northpark Private Hospital in Bundoora, and “once I started talking to a few people and [postnatal depression] was diagnosed, I realised all she needed was for me to be there emotionally for her,” says Bastoni. “That was great, because it took the focus off myself, and my own misery left as well.” Pirotta joined a mothers’ group with other postnatal depression sufferers and started taking anti-depressants. At first, “I was like, ‘Oh no, don’t take that shit,’ because I had a mate who was on a very high dose and it turned him into a zombie,” says Bastoni. “I was petrified that’s what was going to happen to Bianca, but it really helped her. It just stabilised the chemicals in her brain.”

On top of it all, there was a wedding to plan. Ex-bank teller Pirotta and Bastoni, who met at the Melbourne International Comedy

Festival in 2005 and moved in together in Sydney soon after, married three months after Roman’s birth and had their son baptised the same day. “We’d relocated cities, I’d started a new job, had a baby, then got married, all in the space of three months. It was an incredible high-pressure time,” says Bastoni, relaxing in his lounge room as 22-month-old Roman toddles around him with a toy car. “But after our wedding, things settled down. I think that was part of the stress we were feeling, too.”

The actor also credits Roman’s birth and family life with saving him from the hard partying lifestyle he had in Sydney. “I was going out too much and didn’t have a very stable life up there,” says the new narrator of Nine’s *Missing Persons Unit*.

When Bianca fell pregnant, they decided to move closer to their families in Melbourne—where Italian-born Bastoni relocated at age 8 with his mother, Val (who had separated from his Olympic kayaker father, Raffaele), and two sisters—and a two-year *Neighbours* contract came along (his last episode airs on July 24). “I didn’t think I’d end up doing a soap,” says Bastoni,

who made his name on gritty dramas such as *Police Rescue* and *Blue Murder*, “but it served me well, and I needed the stability and regular finance.”

The couple, who enjoy Louis Theroux and Seth Rogen DVDs and swimming, have now bought a “big house with space” on the Mornington Peninsula, and welcomed a second son, Valentino, on June 22.

Are they worried postnatal depression will return? Bianca, now training to teach infant massage, concedes to “panicking” mid-way through the pregnancy and calling Lifeline a few times. “Once you become aware of depression, you can look for the signs and you can talk about stuff and can nip it in the bud,” says Bastoni. “I’m glad we went through it, because it’s made us a lot stronger.”

■ *By Simone Casey*

Wear your slippers to work on Stress Down Day on July 24. To register or donate to Lifeline Australia, visit stressdown.org.au. To contact Lifeline Australia, call 13 11 14.

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—Steve Bastoni

OUT OF THE D



Carlton supporter Bastoni takes a mark with Roman.

Bianca (seven months pregnant on May 29 at home in Doncaster with Bastoni and son Roman) says her husband "really struggled" with her postnatal depression because "he wanted to fix things and it's hard to realise you just can't fix it."



Roman was baptised on the couple's wedding day in October 2007.

ARKNESS