



## Living With Mental Health Problems In Russia

A couple tell of being forced to abort their first baby and fighting to keep their second - all because of their mental health.

By John Sparks, Moscow Correspondent

**Vitaly Kocherov and his wife Natalya are a little bit unusual.**

The pair, who have a lovely eight-year-old daughter called Anna, were both classified as people with mental health problems when they were young – but that's not what makes them different. What makes them so interesting is what they have done with their lives.

When Vitaly and Natalya met nine years ago in St Peterburg's Smolny Asylum, each of them did not understand why the other had been placed in care.

Vitaly had grown up in an orphanage where he was designated 'educationally subnormal' but Natalya told me: "All the orphanage kids get this tag".

Vitaly was equally forthright about his then wife-to-be. "I asked Natalya, why are you disabled? You can read and write. Then we started dating but we were forbidden from being together. (The wardens) said why do you want a woman like her?"

As people with mental health problems in Russia, they had few - if any - rights. In fact, mental illness is widely equated with dangerousness and when Natalya told administrators at Smolny Asylum she was pregnant, they took drastic action.

Natalya says she was taken to a psychiatric hospital and forced to have an abortion.

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"They brought me to a medical ward and gave me an injection.

"I don't remember the rest because I was bedridden and unconscious for two days.

"They thought I was dead and the ambulance came two times but I don't remember that.

"I was told later.

"But they forced me to have the abortion anyway."

She says she knows several other women from mental institutions who were also forced to have the procedure and the St Petersburg-based lawyer who would eventually represent the couple - Dmitri Bartenev - told me it's an "everyday story".

"We believe that it is a common occurrence," he said. "But remember, once you are labelled 'disabled', you lose your basic rights. What's exceptional about Natalya and Vitaly is they fought back."

When Natalya become pregnant a second time, the couple were determined not lose their baby, deciding instead to make a run for it.

"I asked (Vitaly) to saw off the bars on the window because my room was on the first floor. So he sawed them and we ran away... we were renting a flat and then a room, and I was pretty far along when we decided go back to the asylum because they wouldn't be able to perform (an abortion)."

Natalya had a healthy baby girl and they called her Anna but, three days after the birth, medical staff took her away and placed her in an orphanage. Natalya was told she could not visit her daughter and Vitaly spent a month just trying to find out where Anna had gone.

The couple would spent the next six years seeking the right to visit - and eventually live with -

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their daughter. They told me that orphanage and government administrators fought them every step of the way.

"They started to threaten me," said Vitaly. "They said they would lock me up and send me to the crazy ward."

Natalya accused the authorities of simple prejudice.

She said: "Officials think everyone who lives in an asylum are fools, that they can't have children, they can't support themselves and we had to prove them otherwise."

With the help of Mr Bartenev and the charity Mental Disability Advocacy Centre, the couple fought a series of arduous legal battles which culminated in a European Court of Human Rights decision in March, which found the Russian government in violation of Article 8 of the European Convention, setting out the right to respect for family life.

The court criticised officials for "silently ignoring all evidence and arguments" made by Vitaly, resulting in a child being unnecessarily and unlawfully separated from her parents.

As for Anna - well, she seems a perfectly happy seven-year-old.

"I am an A and B student," she told me, "I only got 3 Bs last quarter – the rest are As and the sports teacher will let you train if you forget your gym clothes."

And unlike at the children's home, she says she "can spend two hours in a foamy bath".

"If she wanted to," says her mother.

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