

postnatal depression

When exactly it started is a mystery to me. Maybe it crept into the space left behind by the euphoria of giving birth, taking up the unnaturally empty space in my body. It shadowed my every move. Slept between Matthias and me, beat me to Ben's crib at night. It fought for attention, begged to cuddle close and have its ugly head stroked while it suckled in the dead of night.

by Emma Norris

How could I feel this way? I had a beautiful, healthy baby – a gift from the Heavens. My milk was abundant. People sung their praises on how I had assumed my new role. I smiled sweetly. Maybe if I ignored it, it would fade. I didn't know what to do. Sometimes I did nothing except sleep (or not), eat, feed. Sometimes, I tried to outrun it by keeping busy.

I found myself on auto pilot, only in overdrive emotionally. Rock bottom slammed up to me. I remember it well. We were meeting friends that day. I didn't want to go. Matt suggested I stay home. "They'll wonder why I'm not there, and I don't feel like dealing with their questions", I answered. I started to cry en route. Matt said it would be alright, and that he was there for me, that he and Ben loved me. Ben had succumbed to the drone of the car, exhausted from a night of broken sleep.

Doubts and confusion

Ben still woke a minimum of three times a night, determined not to wean. I too struggled horribly with the idea, let alone the process. I was utterly unprepared for how difficult it would be, physically and emotionally. It was an uphill battle: Ben wouldn't have it, and asked to feed even more. I was so confused. Wasn't this whole motherhood thing supposed to be fulfilling and wonderful? Doubts plagued my mind: maybe I was a bad mother. What if I lost it completely on one of Ben's crying jags? Maybe I didn't know what I was doing. Maybe he could sense it. Maybe that's why he cried so much. After all, could colic really last beyond six months?

During that car ride it blind-sided me. I could no longer ignore it. I wanted to turn off my dulled emotions, swathe the rawness that prickled inside. And I needed help to do so. Looking at Matt through my tears, I said the 'd-word'. I whispered, "I'm depressed." Sleep deprivation and its tortures were one thing. But it went beyond that. I had no interest in anything.

Faking it

When our friends asked, I blamed my puffy eyes on unseasonably early allergies. They bought it. I barely spoke that afternoon. 'Faking it' required a willpower I couldn't muster. The next day I called my doctor. I asked to speak to her and was denied. I insisted, squeaking in a shaky voice: "I am depressed and I need to do something about it". Within seconds, the doctor's voice was on the line. We arranged for an appointment two days later.

In her sparse but friendly office the words spilled out: I'd had two bouts of depression before and knew the signs. I'd get listless, not be interested in anything. I was exhausted but couldn't sleep, had a short fuse, if any at all. I'd make mountains out of molehills and cry over spilled milk. I couldn't concentrate on anything. We discussed the options. An hour and a half later she agreed to the combination of medication and therapy, since I had successfully used that 'formula' before. It's not like I was overjoyed, but I had exhausted other possibilities. Knowing my history, this was the best option. She prescribed an anti-depressant I knew well and put me in touch with a behavioural therapist.

The first medication 'surge' came after about ten days. Before that I hadn't felt anything but relief. The timing was perfect: the night before had been virtually sleepless. Ben was cutting teeth. I had braced my sleep-deprived brain for the office. With a deadline to meet, my phone rang off the hook. I multi-tasked on multi-tasking, typed at warp-speed and tortured my neck while holding the phone between my cheek and shoulder. The day flew by. At times I found myself humming. I went to the Ladies' Room and smiled at my reflection, marvelling at how the 'bags' were more trunk-like in proportion.

Re-connecting

After a long day I went home with a spring in my step, taking in the beauty of autumn leaves, feeling excited, upbeat. Then it hit me: my anti-depressants were kicking in. "Hey, the 'personality pills' are working," I joked with Matt, "I'm back!" There was another 'surge' about a week later. Then things evened out. A pattern I'd seen before. I felt better 'in general' - not euphoric, not ecstatic - just calmer, more even-tempered and patient, able to cope. I laughed more, felt 'connected' with what I was doing. Matthias also noticed it. I'd find myself sighing benevolently at Ben's attempts to get his alphabet pasta into his ears, nose (or mine). I would joke with him, "Look, Ben! There's an M, and an E, and an S... and another S. What does that spell, Sweetie" ??

I took the anti-depressants for seven months. Around month five I started telling my therapist how I looked forward to coming off them. I felt ready. I liked the therapist. He had a hands on approach, was pragmatic. With his guidance and supervision I 'weaned' off the medication. This weaning process was a happy one: I was emotionally ready, felt strong again, re-connected. I saw the therapist a few times after coming off the medication completely, and found - to my delight - that the sessions were no different. I talked about the same things, felt the same - only I was doing it without the medication.

And here I am now, almost three months off medication and feeling on top of things. Sure, I have my 'bad' days when I have a short fuse and am exhausted. But who doesn't? But I also have my days and moments where I laugh, or cry for joy, giggle and play with Ben.

Reaching out

Today, Ben's hand reached up and curled around two of my fingers as we walked in the park. In my mind's eye, I looked back on the path I had just travelled. Half the battle was admitting that I needed help to find the light at the end of the tunnel. So what if I held an invisible hand to get there... the point is getting there, right? Even moms need a hand to hold every now and then. I know, in my heart of hearts, as we stroll along and Ben chatters away in his inimitable way, that I did the right thing: for him, for me, and for the family. ■



Emma Norris lives and works in Switzerland. She is happy to report that the glass continues to be half full rather than half empty. She takes every day as it comes, and is ever-hopeful that Ben will grow out of his night-waking any day now!