

Tears of joy, tears of sorrow



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Medical student

I am studying medicine at Brighton and Sussex Medical School, and live on the Isle of Man with my parents and older brother. When I am not studying I spend my time at the gym, probably not working out as much as I should, but preferring swimming and the whirlpool! I love listening to music and am the family DJ – regularly updating my parents' music playlists and keeping them with it. I love to bake 'melt in the middle' chocolate puddings and I am a big rugby fan. For as long as I can remember I have wanted to be a doctor and I am enjoying every moment of that journey.

Summary

The 2010 BHMA student essay competition was for the best 1,500 word essay on the theme 'The story of my illness'. There were 59 entries; most were good, some very good but the judges felt this essay was the best.

The only statistics I could find were from 2009 stating that 316 babies died in the UK every year as a result of sudden infant death syndrome. In my calculations that meant that near enough every day, barring a few weekends, a mother somewhere in the UK woke to find her precious baby blue and lifeless. I spent most of my pregnant days fretting that if I did have my baby, if it even arrived alive, would it die too? The thought frightened the life out of me as I caressed my growing tummy and prayed that it would never be me. Five weeks after my baby Eva was born I had a dark sickening change of perception about cot death. I watched my husband cuddling Eva and thought 'well at the end of the day if she did die, it wouldn't actually be so bad'. Admitting that now makes me feel sick but I'm telling you this because you need to hear it. You need to know how I felt, so you can help people like me.

I am not really sure when it all started. It just did. I don't think it just arrived like an unexpected downpour on a sunny day. I am not even sure that it built up like dark clouds forming above dangerously threatening to unleash their contents. It didn't even creep up on me really. What it did do though, was silently but steadily seep into my whole being, invading my world with darkness. Each day I felt heavier and heavier as if trying to walk through water against

a rising tide. Falling deeper and deeper into a dark pit, and the tears, the urgent need to just sit and cry. I felt nothing for my baby girl, a baby I had longed so much for. Beautiful Eva. Maybe the trauma of the failed attempts had messed up my mind. Maybe with each miscarriage I lost some of myself, some of my spirit. The arrival of this healthy, perfectly formed 'Annes Geddes look-a-like' baby should have been the happy ever after. Instead I felt totally useless, totally inadequate, total despair. This was my illness. This was post natal depression.

The first month after Eva's birth was a blur of counting hours through sleepless nights, relentless feeds, yo-yoing between bouts of elation and pride and extreme sadness and anxiety, for no apparent reason. Not even able to hold a conversation or remember what I had actually done that day. Cleverly avoiding answering the door and making up excuses why it wasn't convenient for friends to visit. I was turning into an adept liar and I didn't know why. I think people knew way before me though. Just the way they asked 'so how are you feeling today?' not really satisfied with my 'yeah fine' response. You see when I was young Mrs Price up the road was diagnosed with post natal depression – we never saw her again and her baby was taken into care. That's what I thought happened when you had post natal depression.

I wasn't allowed to feel like this, it just wasn't right. I was too embarrassed to even tell my husband about the thoughts I'd been having. I was scared he would think I was dark, that I was a risk to Eva and that I was a bad wife. It turned out that I didn't need to tell him, he knew. I was furious when I found out that my husband had been to see our GP, saying he was concerned about my 'complete change in character'. I didn't like our local practice, each time I'd been there during my pregnancy I'd seen a different doctor. My husband had asked one of the doctors to come visit me at home. I felt betrayed.

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The GP who came to the house was exactly how I expected him to be. He was very ordinary looking, middle-aged, average height, wearing dark trousers and a crisp white shirt. He wore glasses that allowed him to look down his nose at me. He was a locum, in other words a complete stranger. I remember thinking 'I can't tell him how I feel, he won't care, he doesn't even know me'. There were polite introductions and my husband offered him a cup of tea. I stared at the floor. I waited for the doctor to begin interrogating me. I remained quiet, thinking he would fill the silence. I was surprised when he just sat down and waited.

We waited in silence for what felt like an eternity. The doctor ate a chocolate biscuit my husband had given him with his cup of tea. Since I was a child chocolate biscuits had always been my favourite 'naughty' snack, I could never resist them. I sat there, watching the doctor eat his biscuit and I couldn't think of the last time I'd enjoyed a chocolate biscuit, or any food for that matter. I actually couldn't think of the last time I enjoyed anything at all. The silence was deafening. I had a sudden urge to shout at him, and I did. I cracked. While floods of tears poured down my cheeks, I told him I felt nothing and hated that I felt I couldn't cope, and I told him everything, the big things and the little things. I confessed that I ask my husband to put Eva to bed every night because she won't go to sleep when I put her down, because I'm a bad mother. He sat calmly taking it all in. I had come clean. I had confessed all.

He took another sip from his tea, and looked straight at me and said, 'we can help you sort this out, it's a moment in time, you've experienced an enormous life-changing event, and it takes time to adjust, but you will adjust and find yourself again'. His words, his reassurance, the expression 'find myself again' hit the nail on the head.

It was as if I was lost. At that moment I felt like I had woken up to a new chance and a new beginning, but wasn't sure how I would 'find' me again. He went on to explain how common it is to have the feelings I had and that it wasn't any indication at all of my abilities to parent. He said that whilst post natal depression is a real issue for many women after having a baby and even women who have had two or more children can still suffer. He explained that I had set myself too high an expectation, I was being too hard on myself and that with the support of my friends and family I would develop my new routine and learn to be myself again. He said that in reality, life isn't easy and we have to recognise the pressures, and put plans into action to combat the effects. He made it all sound so normal, I felt so relieved.

We made a plan to start gently with ideas of things I enjoyed doing, things he said that defined me; the real me. I thought about the chocolate biscuits, and how I had enjoyed baking and my old cake decoration classes. I used to think I would start a business cake making and decorating to order. For a moment he didn't feel like a doctor and I realised I was enjoying talking about completely different things, about possibilities and my future. 'I don't think there's any need for any medication here', he said, 'only 10% of women really need that', I wasn't one of them. What you need is 'a prescription to enjoy your life'; with that he got up, left and promised to come back tomorrow to chat more. He returned the next day and gave me lots of information about ways to cope with how I was feeling. We talked about alternative therapies, relaxation techniques, and various support groups and with the help of my local community, family and friends I started on a road to recovery. A new me, a happy me. A new start for Eva, my husband and I. The cloud had lifted.

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It all seems so long ago now, another lifetime, although in a way, always part of me; but part of me that has made me stronger. Today as I left the parent and baby group after delivering my fairy cakes for their tea party I looked around and saw mums trying to cope, to do their best. I wondered how many might be feeling like I had. Please remember my story and be the person who notices. Be the person who puts out the distress call, who makes the first move. Life isn't always easy but it's always worth living.

