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## Not What I Expected

Along with my baby came another new arrival: postpartum depression.

Margaret Hogan

*Weeping, panic, rage, and shame* were not exactly the words I was expecting to define my grand entrance into motherhood. But expecting is itself a tricky word.

Postpartum depression is one of the cruelest battles your body can undergo. It takes what you were expecting and flips it upside down. It steals joy, leaving behind anxiety, contempt, anger, and dread—at least that's what it did to me. I could give you the statistics and outline the symptoms, but that's why God gave us Google. Instead, I'm going to tell you my story.

### How it began

We'd been home from the hospital for just a few days. Our tiny blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty was healthy, squirmy, and delightful. Ruby was every single thing I had prayed and longed for. Now here she was, real, in our home.

And then, one night, it happened.

While my husband cleaned up the dishes and my mom held our girl, I sat alone on the edge of the bed and had my first terrifying panic attack. I could feel the electricity dancing just beneath my skin. My hormones had launched an aggressive and cruel onslaught against my nervous system. The same thoughts looped over and over through my mind: *I can't do this. I'm not ready. We should have waited. I need out!*

I buried my face in my hands and let out a desperate wail. What was wrong with me? And who could I even tell? If I said aloud all the things I was really thinking as I sat on the bed, I would sound crazy. And crazy is scary. I was ashamed and scared to death. I trembled, tapping my fingers on my knee, anxiously trying to talk myself down and reason myself back to sanity. But the truth is, it's hard to be in your own skin when you're not in your right mind.

### Beyond the "baby blues"

Being a new mom is challenging enough, even in the best circumstances. There's the crying infant, the endless, sleepless nights, the shocking lack of personal space, and all that being needed 24/7 business. And then there's the terrible moment when you feel utterly naked because being a mom actually reveals what a little girl *you* still are in so many ways. You expected (there's that word again) motherhood to be beautiful and healing, revealing your deepest desire for innocence, intimacy, wholeness—the stuff of creation. And it is—unless, of course, your insides are buzzing like a madwoman and not enough oxytocin is rushing through your brain, smoothing out exhaustion into joy or churning your emotions into a buoyancy that is born of sleepy gratitude.

Looking back to those early days, I was in shock, unable to accept what was happening and trying to bargain my way out. But out of *what?* And *why?* That's the cruel part. I had a sense, even then, that my feelings didn't match my circumstances. I had been given the beautiful gift of a healthy baby but I felt like I was dying. Trying to reconcile the gap truly made me feel like my brain was going to break.

People said it was just "baby blues"—typical new-mama stuff. But I knew it was more than that. The first day my husband went back to work, I took my baby girl to my parents' house, curled up in a ball, and didn't move for hours. I sobbed into a blanket while my parents sat nearby, trying to reassure me. A few days later I made an appointment with my OB/GYN. She told me I

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was fine and that I'd feel better soon. I wish I'd been able to advocate for myself in that moment, but my words were stuck, powerless inside me.

And so it was just me and the dull hum of depression. My nine-month season of joy and expectation was now tangled up with grief. I couldn't see myself clearly. My capacity for any kind of productivity shrank to doing only what was necessary. Normal things felt overwhelming. I cried for no reason at all. I was bubbling over inside with anger, dreaming of throwing plates against a wall or screaming into a storm. I took comments from strangers personally. My energy was zapped and my senses were muted. I had trouble even faking a smile. And while I never wanted to hurt myself, I remember wondering if I was going to die from this—like I might slowly disappear into nothing.

### Dealing with the "D" word

Even at my lowest, I knew it wasn't about Ruby. She was never the problem. I really liked *her*. She was my best girl. I just couldn't handle how completely nuts and stuck and gone I felt inside myself. The shame was overwhelming, keeping me silent and hidden. So the trick, I learned, was to not turn on myself, to not make me into the villain of my own story. It was as simple—and as *complicated*—as that.

A brilliant therapist, who is also a dear friend, advised me to pay attention to my contempt. He could see that I was dangerously close to letting my disappointment morph into a belief that I was bad—that my body, my womb, my new-mom self, was bad. Instead, he invited me to view myself as simply being sick and needing kindness, softness, care, and as much oxytocin as I could muster. He reminded me that I was still *good*—and he urged me to be ferocious on behalf of myself, rather than ferocious *toward* myself. Ultimately, he gave me permission to use the D-word. To *name* it. To not be fearful of calling depression *depression*.

It's hard to be honest when the truth is painful, but it's the fastest way to health. Naming my postpartum depression liberated me. It helped me understand what was happening and gave me a way to interact with it. I'm not a doctor or an expert, but here are some things that helped me get through and that might be helpful to you if you, too, are facing postpartum depression.

- **Be explicit with your doctor.** Tell your doctor the truth. Say exactly what is happening and what it feels like. If your doctor feels unsafe to you or seems uninterested in asking good questions, it is time for you to find a new, better doctor. I was afraid to ask for more care, but more care is what I needed. I needed thoughtfulness, attentiveness, and an antidepressant. (Which, incidentally, my new doctor prescribed in low doses at the birth of our second daughter—and it's been tremendously helpful!)
- **Think like a recovering addict.** You only have to be a mom one day at a time. You don't have to be enough for the next 18 years; you only have to be enough for today. There's no point trying to store up extra grace for the days ahead.
- **Get a gaggle.** Isolation is the enemy. We need people we can text in the middle of the night to ask about infant fevers and toddler poops and whether or not sleep training is ever going to work. We need objective, loving, wise friends to sit with us while we cry, to pray with us, to remind us that today doesn't define every day, and to whisper softly, "Me too."
- **Find a counselor.** Pick a good one. Shop around. My husband and I are committed to our counselor. He forces me to be kind to myself (which is annoying sometimes). He helps me when I get stuck or feel upside down or want to jump out of my skin. A professional that can help you move toward wholeness is worth every penny.
- **Take care of your body.** Sleep, feed yourself, stretch, move, and drink more water than you think you can. Pay attention to your breathing, to where you are carrying your anxiety, and to what things help you relax. Oh, and get your hair done. Seriously, if every-thing else has fallen apart, you might as well have fresh highlights to remind you, even just for a few minutes, that the essential you is still in there—and she will be okay . . . eventually.

My postpartum depression kicked me down. But it didn't last forever. Postpartum depression didn't have the final say about me as a mom. And it even left with me a few gifts: it forced me to develop the habit of reaching out to other moms, the practice of asking for help, and the rhythm of connecting with my body. It even offered me the chance to face my anger and to continue discovering what it means to treat myself kindly. I wasn't expecting having a baby would invite me into the fight of my life. But, of course, *expecting* is a tricky word.

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