

Surfacing from the depths

Lou Louw shares her story of living with postnatal depression

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

I was deeply depressed – suicidal – for two years before I realised that this was not normal motherhood. I just thought that I was a bad mother, a bad businesswoman and a bad wife. I really thought that my daughter, Emma, and husband, Nic, would be better off without me. I lost my self-confidence and doubted everything I did.

With child

Nic and I had planned our pregnancy. I had even turned two colleagues into business partners to help run my business while I embarked on motherhood, and we started renovating our house. Thankfully, I fell pregnant really easily and had no particular pregnancy issues, in fact I felt really good during the pregnancy.

The cracks started to show when both of my business partners resigned on the day I found out I was pregnant, leaving me with a lot of debt and a floundering

business. Although the renovation was well planned and we used an architect and a reputable builder, what was meant to take just six months ended up taking over a year and costing almost double. Coupled with my business not doing well, we were under a lot of financial pressure. The interaction with the builder was just horrendous and I found this incredibly unsettling.

A homecoming

Emma's birth was amazing and so was my experience at the hospital. She was a healthy baby, weighing in at 3.6kg. The idea of breastfeeding freaked me out, so I decided not to. This was a mistake – I would advise any new mother to at least try breastfeeding before making the decision not to do it. Nic was able to stay with us at the hospital, so it was great to have him with me the whole time, night and day. It was bliss until we went home:

the house that we were renting had been cleaned out by burglars the night before. They took absolutely everything, from the kettle to the duvet cover – I was incredibly traumatised by the experience.

Despite this, our first couple of weeks as a family were wonderful. Nic, Emma and I spent a lot of time together, friends came around and were super-excited about our new baby. Our families both came from Cape Town and Upington to meet our new child. It was only when Emma was about four weeks old that I started to get panicky – the feeling just crept up on me. I knew I had to get to work to sort things out, so I needed to organise a nanny, but was petrified of leaving my child with a complete stranger.

I didn't feel at ease as a mom, ever. I worried about Emma constantly. I was worried about doing everything perfectly. Visiting friends with babies freaked me out completely – answering all those

questions about how she was gaining weight, sleeping, eating, and so on left me feeling intimidated and totally depleted of energy (physically and emotionally). I thought it was normal to feel the way I did – that I was just sleep deprived, but I was not coping at all. So I started isolating myself completely.

Then, at about nine weeks, Emma came down with what seemed like a cold. After a week of suctioning mucus at a physiotherapist and seeing the doctor everyday for a check-up, a paediatrician admitted Emma into the ICU with respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). She was there for a total of ten days. This sent me over the edge.

Losing myself

I was prescribed an antidepressant and it made me feel better. I thought that was the end of that little "hiccup". I got on with my life at work, as a new mother and wife, but felt stretched and over-exerted. I lost a sense of my own identity – it was like I no longer existed. My days started with tears and anxiety.

By this point my husband was exasperated and thought that he had lost the person he was once very much in love with. No one really knew how much I was suffering because I tried to hide it for a very long time. Even so, every person in my immediate circle of family and close friends suffered to some degree as a result of my emotional state. They could tell that something was very wrong but did not know what it was or how to deal with it – my mom had suffered from postnatal depression (PND), but it was not something her generation discussed openly.

I went from being an extremely outgoing and gregarious person to being completely withdrawn and run down. I withdrew from my circle of friends and came up with a vast number of excuses not to have leave my house.

Getting help

Two years after Emma was born, I finally went to see a psychologist, who thankfully had personal experience with PND. She



All better now Lou treasures her relationship with Emma, despite the hard work it took to get to this point.

NEED HELP?

The PNDSA helpline is 082 882 0072. SMS "help" and your name and they will contact you.

“Mothers are not superheroes, and you don't have to be when you become one.”

immediately sent me to a psychiatrist who diagnosed me and prescribed medication. I have been seeing her for over two years. Therapy, with someone who had been through PND herself, has been life changing. The combination of the correct medication, therapy with the right therapist and exercise has been very good for me. It's not an instant fix, but it gave me the tools to deal with my life in a very constructive way.

I closed my business and started doing something that I love very recently. I have changed the pace of my life and make a point to be very gentle with myself.

I live in the moment and I do not take on more than I can handle. I have learned to put personal boundaries in place. I have a very close relationship with Emma (now five); I am able to be creative with her and I have the energy and time to leave the house for walks in the park, or trips to the zoo. Two years ago I would attempt such a trip and it would end up a complete disaster.

Lou's advice

If you have PND, get the best therapist you can lay your hands on – someone who has had a personal experience with PND. Take medication: you are not a failure if you do, it can literally save your life. Surround yourself with support. Do not withdraw; it makes it 100 times worse. PND is not a dirty little secret, it happens to more people than you can imagine. Take care and be very, very gentle with yourself. Mothers are not superheroes and you don't have to be when you become one. You are the best mother your child can have. ●