

Pressure, pressure

I felt in a daze when we both got home again and seemed to drift along. We reverted to our usual visits to family and friends in an endeavour to 'pick up the pieces' and recover from our ordeal. One good thing was that I now could fit into my jeans. I could not breathe but I could fasten them! Dominic was not sleeping well at all after having been disturbed so much by his illness. In the daytime he had periods of severe irritability and then for no apparent reason would be all smiles, usually for his grandmother. Physically his development was fine, making progress in that he could play with his toes, almost rolled from his back onto his front and could hold items midline with two hands. My GP had signed a sick note for me whilst I was in hospital with Dominic for two weeks so initially I did not need to worry about my absence. Nick said they were coping fine at school and as I would soon be back then they would manage.

When Nick went to work for the first time that September I became even more tired. He still did not look well after the side-effects of the anti-meningitis drug so I tried desperately hard for him not to be disturbed during the nights. As Dominic was waking every few hours I put him in with me in the small bed, so I did not really rest. I went to the church coffee morning on the Monday where everyone was so kind to us both and pleased to see Dominic looking well. When we came home I sobbed and sobbed due to the extreme tiredness I was feeling. Claire came at lunchtime when I was trying, without much success, to feed Dominic his lunch. I remember being very defensive about how well I was coping and tried to convince her that he would soon be eating again and sleeping and that I would be fine to go back to work in a week or two. I was jumpy and snappy in all my replies to her and flitted from extreme moods. I did not convince her and she told our mother later that although Dominic was fine, it was now me who was causing concern. 'Rubbish, I'm fine,' was my reply to that.

Next day we slept until mid-morning but as I had said I would take my grandmother to Chester hospital to have her dressings changed on her skin graft, it resulted in me panicking as we were late. We called on Sue and Ben. She admitted that she was also very worried about me. At least Dominic ate plenty of solids at teatime and he had generally had a more balanced day mood-wise. Nick began to bathe him most nights now as I suppose he could see I needed a break. We went to an NCT coffee morning

and I was the centre of attention when Sue (Sophie's mother) told them about our dramatic hospital stay and I quite enjoyed telling them all about it. We then called to see Granny H. Throughout the latest hospital stay she had been a great support to us both and I was pleased in the aftermath that she and I were closer and she had no hesitation now in cuddling Dominic. As a young mother herself she had to cope with Glenys and Nick having polio. Both had been in isolation wards for weeks. Nick could only be held if she wore protective clothing and he was only a few months old then. She must have suffered terribly at that time.

Dominic's skin was a mess when we came out of hospital. It was very dry with some red itchy patches. I took him to see our GP who prescribed various ointments and bath oils. She also realised that I needed more time off work and gave me a sick note for another two weeks. She said that I was obviously very tired and still had not recovered from the trauma of Dominic's illness. I felt relieved but ended up in bed early that night with a bad headache. Nick gently suggested that I should take life a bit easier without running around here and there. He had begun to tread carefully with me as I could verbally fly off the handle at the simplest of suggestions. Next day I did my version of relaxing by cleaning the house, ironing and cooking a proper meal. I was my own worst enemy.

By mid-September, for my mother's birthday, we went for a family day out to Hawkstone Park and Follies near Whitchurch. It has pleasant walks and unusual natural and manmade areas to explore. Claire, Mum, Dad, Nick, Dominic and I all had a good day. The sun shone and because there were plenty of us to fuss Dominic he was a very contented baby. Again I tried to convince everyone that I was fine and soon would be fit for work. At times like this I probably did appear quite like my usual calm, organised self and did a reasonable job of fooling people. Nick made us have a quiet time the next day and we went to my parents for our evening meal. This became a regular event on a Sunday and it was their way of helping us. Dominic's daytime routines were slowly coming back, as regards sleeping and feeding, and he was not quite as clingy to me and did not cry or scream as much. He was still very disturbed at night, however, waking two or three times and taking a while each time to settle again. Meanwhile I continued to be very tired and had become very weepy at the least thing. Even a slight struggle opening a pot of yoghurt could reduce me to tears and any minor spillage could make me sob profusely. Everything I did was becoming increasingly hard, and such an effort. Dominic's improvements, like becoming excited when he saw his spoon and jar of food, almost passed me by.

Yet I continued to keep us both busy. If I stayed in all day Dominic seemed more fretful, which I could not handle, and as he now enjoyed going out it seemed to be the easier option. If I kept busy I also did not feel as tired. The next week passed by with shopping, going to our various

coffee mornings and taking my grandparents for hospital appointments. One evening I did phone my mother in tears and ask her to have Dominic for a few hours. I needed some time away from him. He was still aggravated by his itchy skin and I went back to the GP the next day. She actually asked more about me than Dominic, which puzzled me at the time as I was fine, wasn't I?

Following on from our successful day out at Hawkstone Park I suggested that we all had another trip out. This time we went for a walk around Jumbles Country Park, near Bolton. The walk was good but all the places we had coffee, lunch and tea were problematic in one way or another and Dominic did not settle, leading to more stress. I had begun to feel that it was only me who could solve his distress. For a while this was true in hospital but now I was blind to the fact that others could soothe him too. I was still breast-feeding him regularly and usually this would comfort him, something that no one else could offer him. I felt indispensable to him and although the family tried to help me I was like a spoilt child with a new doll. He was mine and no one else was allowed to get near.

The following morning Nick kept Dominic with him whilst he did his chores and left me to rest and sleep. Instead I read the newspaper which contained an article about postnatal depression. My belief that I was 'not the type' to have such a thing and that my problems were purely due to tiredness began to dispel. As I read the symptoms of mood swings, tiredness, irritability, weepiness, I recognised myself. They suggested antidepressant tablets as a cure but I immediately dismissed that idea as I did not need drugs; I just needed a rest which was also a suggestion. I felt optimistic that maybe after a few good nights of sleep everything would be all right again. At my parents for a meal that evening, Dominic ate plenty of food and even had more porridge when we came home. I felt convinced that we would all be fine and had a couple of good days.

Ray, the vicar, had encouraged Nick and I to attend a series of weekly discussion groups questioning the Christian faith, called Alpha classes. As both of us were not sure about our true beliefs, it seemed a good idea and we hoped to make some new friends. It also meant that we did something as a couple and my parents would babysit for us for a couple of hours. I felt very guilty going to the classes initially as I had always been brought up to believe that if you were not fit for school or work then you should not be out socialising. Everyone else said I needed to get out to help me feel better, so we went. It was good to break away from everything at home but really it was not an ideal time for me to join in religious debates. I was so confused about everything in my own life at that stage, so having to contribute to group discussions added even more pressures. It was refreshing though to hear some points of view from firm believers in the Christian faith. I felt envious of the calmness and peace that they appeared to have about life. I had now begun to get worried about mundane aspects, such as

what to make for a meal, yet these people appeared to float through life. I wanted to feel such contentment and spiritually rich.

I continued with our outings and I took Dominic to his first Mums and Tots swimming session. I really enjoyed it with him. I still had great maternal pleasure in holding him, especially when he was so vulnerable in the water and he clung to me for security. I loved his smell, especially his hair. I loved to watch his movements. I was fascinated by his increasing social awareness which drove me forward to take him to more places. Consequently I was not content with the one outing and we then had lunch with Sue and Sophie, went to a church group and called at my grandparents before coming home. I made Nick and I a proper meal and spent ages liquidising some of it for Dominic. He spat it out. I got upset. Nick reprimanded me for doing too much again. I said I had to keep busy as I would not survive at work if I spent my time now lazing around. Luckily Nick took over Dominic for the rest of the evening whilst he made me 'just sit'.

This was followed by another really disturbed night and I moped around all morning in my dressing gown, bemoaning my current situation. My mother phoned to see how I was and suggested that as my father was not working, why not let him look after Dominic for a few hours? I did so and spent a few hours making myself look presentable for Ben's second birthday party that afternoon. I collected Dominic, changed him into his smart wedding outfit and off we went. Sue was due to go into hospital the next day to have a Caesarean. She was very weary too and in comparison I felt slim and awake! In reality, in my worst spells I felt just as exhausted as a heavily pregnant mother-to-be. Our health visitor came out to see us again. She wrote in Dominic's record book that I needed more sleep and was not on top of things at present. I felt offended. Of course I was!

Back at the GP's the next day, I had more creams for Dominic's 'sand-paper' skin and once again she spent a while talking to me. She sighed, put her pen down and looked at me. She explained that she felt now that my moods and feelings were not just due to the trauma and stress of Dominic's illness but that I was indeed suffering from postnatal depression. This was usually caused by hormonal and medical changes although, in my case, the other stresses I had been under may have made it worse. When I told her that I had read an article about it and had recognised some of my symptoms too, so agreed with her, I almost felt she was relieved. She suggested that I tried some tablets which would help me to relax and sleep, when I could, but also that they may help me feel more on top of things. She continued to say that they were not an instant cure and that they would take a few weeks to take effect, but in her opinion they were worth me trying. I told her that I felt antidepressant drugs were for people 'who could not cope' and that once I started on them then I would be addicted for life – common assumptions by many people. She disagreed on both

aspects and stressed that I had an illness that would be helped by medication, just like any other complaint. I still felt though that it was purely because I was inadequate but I was willing to try them. She signed me off for a further four weeks. Part of me felt relief that I had longer off but equally I felt terribly guilty for the problems I knew it would cause at school as they were having trouble finding a suitable supply teacher. I phoned them hesitantly but the head teacher told me not to worry but to get well soon. We then went to visit Cathy as we had decided that maybe Dominic should start spending some time with her.

In a way I suppose I was quite relieved to be told that I had an identifiable illness because it gave me something to hang a label onto. I have always loved 'projects' ever since junior school days. I love researching and planning, just as I did before Dominic was born. When postnatal depression (PND) was diagnosed, I looked it up in every medical book we had and homed in on any relevant articles in magazines. Nick and I were especially alert to any form of help and consequently I discovered and wrote to the Association for Post Natal Illness [see contact details in the Appendix]. Their newsletter was useful with short articles on past and present sufferers and fundraising. One of the services they offer is a telephone link with a former sufferer as a means of support. I did get a number and name but I can not remember if I got in touch. They continue to send me newsletters and raffle tickets so I am well aware that there are still many people suffering from this condition, and it is one reason why I am writing all of this. It was through one of their articles that I read about a lady who was researching the area. Later on she came to interview me about my experiences as part of her studies. They also sent a useful booklet about PND, notes for the carer and a leaflet on puerperal psychosis, the most severe form of the illness. I read it and dismissed it as almost ridiculous. How on earth anyone would want to harm themselves and their baby was beyond me. However, all the leaflets were of help and we let our families and close friends look at them. We even sent them into school for the head to look at.

I found a copy of a letter which I wrote to my college friends, Margaret and Richard, around this time. It shows how I was feeling and that at least I was prepared to tell my friends – on paper.

When Dominic was discharged from hospital and we came home it was like him being newborn, as there were no rules again. The diagnosis was that he'd had a viral septicaemia which left much longer would have gone to his spine, then brain ... luckily we got him there in time.

The trauma for us has been awful. Nick and I had to take an anti-meningitis drug which made him poorly too and he missed the start of term. He is now back at work but I am not. Initially I was, and still am, exhausted as Dominic still does not sleep for

more than three hours at a time and, instead of the happy, contented baby he was, is much more demanding and whingy. He is improving but unfortunately I appear to be showing classic postnatal depression symptoms! School will just have to wait as at the moment thinking out what I should cook for dinner is causing me great anxiety and panic attacks, so I'd not be much use in a classroom. Since February I have had a total of 28 nights in hospital which is now telling on me. Prior to these last few weeks I admit I had no sympathy with PND sufferers, but I have now!

I hope that as Dominic continues to improve, I will to. We just feel so upset that all was okay until he was so poorly. I wouldn't wish that experience on anyone. I am now trying to find a balance between resting and yet not staying in all that much. If I'm on my own I want company and yet when I'm in company I want to be by myself!

Enough wallowing ...

My friend Sue, who you met at our wedding, is due in hospital for a section on Thursday as the baby is breach. That is Ben's 2nd birthday so he is having his party a day earlier this year – I've been asked to help with the jelly, etc. I should cope with that! She will then have the baby on Friday because she said she didn't want them to share the same birthday. I don't think I could manage two yet!

I had better finish as there is a screaming baby lying on the floor next to me!

By the time Dominic was five months old he weighed 18 lbs 1 oz and was 67.5 cm long. He had no regular sleep or feeding patterns due to his illness but had recently begun a range of pureed foods in addition to breast milk. His favourite tastes were pears, carrots, porridge, beans and bacon (tinned), and fromage frais with fruit. He had developed dry and rough patches on his skin but his health was reasonable in general. He could lift his head up, watch his hands, roll onto his side then to his front and loved to play with his toes. He had longer hair and smiled a lot more at people and things. He had developed a range of happy sounds and would 'talk' to us frequently.

He did not have a 'typical' day at this stage. Neither did I.