

MASK – ER – AID

by corkid

M – M ore easy to remove the Mask

A – A nd conquer my own fears

S – S wallow up my pride of perfection with the

K – K nowledge that I AM loved

and I CAN DO ALL THINGS, through Christ, who strengthens ME.

I have been a mom for 20 years now, when the most traumatic episode of PPD hit me like a brick after the birth of our “Love Child”. This was my fourth birthing experience, his first. This was also my 18th year of prescribed anti-depressants, with only three vacations from the drug as I never wanted to be taking drugs during a pregnancy.

February 2006 - All was bliss, when labour started in the comfort of home with my new husband of two years and my sister (an RN who has worked in Mother/Baby wards for over 20 years) right at my bedside. When it was time to go to the hospital, I was led into the best labouring room, with the best nurse (my sis) and best soul mate I had always dreamed of since I was a little girl. No doctors to complain about my not wanting meds for the pain, an assistant for my sis to get through the short 2 hour birth – and then wallah – our healthy, beautiful baby was placed in Daddy’s arms. Even the exhaustion I had could not stop me from noticing the tears that welled up in his eyes as his new girl (all wrinkled, cheesy and red) opened her eyes and batted the BIG BLUES at him...

Week 2 - mother-in-law left our home (crying and apologizing for “whatever she did wrong?” - which was not one little thing) the MASK went up. Lack of sleep, and what seemed like endless hours of nursing took me over the edge.

Week 3 - I remember literally crawling, step for step, up to the second story of our home... crawling to his side of the bed, and softly expressing “I can’t do this anymore!” I was drained of all physical sensation, mentally a zombie and emotionless to the point that I couldn’t release the internal pain through even one tear. Out came the baby bottle and formula. I thought this would alleviate my anxiety towards breast feeding and the nipple pain and high demand on me, but that was just self-talk.

I had taken St John’s Wart before, when I wasn’t taking anti-depressants, and usually this got me through. After a few days of over-the-counter meds, I realized this PPD had bigger roots and was rooted deeper by the day. A trip to the doctor for post-natal checkups for me and baby got a healthy seal of approval, and a prescription of Effexor for me. This had been the latest drug with a successful six years, to the point that I was off Effexor for over two years to get pregnant for the fourth time. Waiting for Effexor to kick in was a short week of trauma, but nothing compared to the mental torture of what was to come.

I don’t really remember, but am sure I was asked (after a round-the-table talk with hubby and family) if I needed to go to the hospital. After a psychiatric interrogation (are you suicidal? Check. Do you want to hurt your baby or your other children? Check.) I was admitted to the Psych Ward on a voluntary eight day admission. Massive dosing of drugs for hallucinations, anxiety, sleeping pills, depression and rest was the treatment. Some of the drugs must have worked, as I remember rooking my sis into helping me escape from the ward on one of her visits. I had all my luggage packed, told the nurses she was taking it home to wash and out the door we went. After lying to her that my hubby knew she was bringing me home, I walked through the door of my home, only to have my hubby announce that the Ward was looking for me! My sister burst into rage, explained she didn’t like being used, and pointed out the incident could have cost her a job, being that she was employed by the hospital.

It was the hardest and longest trip my hubby has ever taken (he openly states) to drive me back, re-admit me to the Ward, and watch me be stripped of my street clothes, be served a mandatory three day admission this time, and listen to me trying to convince the doc and nurse that I wasn't needing to be a patient in their care. Another two weeks passed by, and home they sent me, under the strict supervision and help of my family as my husband went back to work.

June 2006 – A full moon illuminated the sky on that night, and I pleaded with my sis to not let me turn around nor convince her that I didn't need to be going back to the Ward another time. Through the Psychiatric consult, I remember having no emotion when admitting openly that the only way my terror could end was to take my life and my kids with it, as there was no one to care for them like I could, and I just didn't feel like living anymore. My sis, who usually doesn't show much emotion, welled up in tears, quietly wiped them away, and refused to look into my eyes. I was voluntarily admitted this time for a month. After a consult with my family, it was agreed that a more aggressive form of treatment was needed, as I was not responding to the course of drugs they had me on. Me and hubby watched a video, then a release form was signed. Xrays, blood tests and ECG performed and I was given a clean bill of health to start down a path of...

ECT treatment #1 – For those not familiar with ECTs, it is a form of treatment thought to release brain chemical by putting the brain into seizure. The history of ECT has documented several pros for its use, but the side affects aren't as openly discussed as I was to find out later! After 12 of these in-hospital treatments, I will admit I had never felt this happy or emotionally calm in all of my life.

I was released back home into the supervision and care of my family yet again, and made every attempt to return to what I had tried to practice before – being a mom, wife and confident woman. By my own admission, I now realize the expectations I had on myself, my husband, my parents, and even my own children were higher than anyone of us could obtain. Regrettably, I threw in the towel in September and asked for more ECT treatments. My sister made an excellent judgement call, and told me being on the Ward again was not living life and that I needed to take responsibility for my recovery.

September to November 2006 - I was not allowed to non-exist in a hospital room, but was asked to just try and function in the real world, with the encouragement and help from my family, as I went through another 12 treatments as an out-patient. Taking baby steps I would now spend the odd hour alone with my new daughter. Yes, I again felt happy and calm from more treatments, but the side effects of ECT were getting frustrating.

May 2007 – I was weaning off the “maintenance ECTs” up to this month, getting only one a week, then one every two weeks, then down to one a month (for a grand total of 35). I made a decision that has proved to be the right one. My psychiatrist and ECT team were horrified when I told them I was refusing any further treatments. “Your risk of PPD Psychosis relapse is 50% or greater...do you want to risk that?” they asked.

HELL YA! – I had enough of hair and weight loss, bruising, diarrhea, hangovers and short-term memory loss from repeated anesthetic and paralyzing induced seizures. Enough of the trips to the hospital and sitting amongst patients that were still there one year later, that visual of the big green doors at the end of the hallway where the locked-down Ward was and its poignant odour. The psychiatrist even put a new diagnosis on me, saying I was not PPD anymore, but now Manic-depressive and Bi-Polar. He ordered more tests and called to let me know that two more mood-suppressing meds were waiting at the pharmacy and should be added to my daily regime. I stood taller than I had ever done before, and took control of destiny for my life. Off came the MASK-er-AID I was coping and living behind.

Just writing this memoir has enlightened me as to how much I have grown from this traumatic journey. I thought I'd been through and seen it all before this PPD:

1988 - birth of first child – I was only 22 and baby was diagnosed with a rare brain malformation. For 12 years I responded more like a nurse, trying to keep my child alive day-to-day.

1992 - surrendered to God, and learned a lot about faith, but the head knowledge hadn't fully dropped down into my heart.

1995 - birth of second child – brought home a healthy boy, only to have my (husband) drop us off home and proceed into a snowstorm to the farm for a seed delivery. Abandonment had been defined!

1999 – birth of third child – quoting the obstetrician, I was the “first mother ever to diagnose her newborn” with Down Syndrome. He apologized over 100 times in the following four days for not seeing it (he actually “saw” her first and missed the tell-tale look of this disability). When I called my best friend seeking comfort and assurance that everything was going to be OK, she awkwardly re-assured me that “if I had to pick another disability, Down Syndrome was much better than Lissencephaly!” Lesson learned – trust no one to understand what I feel.

2000 – my first born dies. Non-related to Lissencephaly, but rather not being able to recover after eight hours of surgery. He had failing kidneys and me and his (father) watched his body bloat from the toxicity. The machine beeped for the last time after 48 hours in ICU. Expressions of utter rage flew out of my mouth for the next 5 days, and my sister now admits I probably should've had a tranquilizer that weekend.

2002 – I asked my (husband) to leave, after trying all I knew of to salvage an already losing battle. I knew my marriage was long over and the court acknowledged that by granting a divorce in 2003.

Can I still see triumph at the end of this tunnel. My answer is simply – YES! We are all like everyone, like someone, and like no one!! One person's tragedies are not more horrific than another's...we should never compare each other's struggles nor feel guilty that our “little hill” seems harder to climb than the “mountain he/she is having to climb”. Every turmoil in life is worth the conquer. I have learned to love myself, and can now love others. I am still learning...

- to forgive myself and others
- to accept my faults and lower my expectations on myself and others – we are all but only human!
- to realize that I don't have to say yes to every request made to me – there are other capable people out there too
- to draw healthy boundaries around me to protect my sanity, and help me become a stronger woman
- to realize I will disappoint and offend everyone someday – “I am not perfect, but will be made perfect on my end day!”

I am striving now to be an assertive effective advocate. This is my help to community and those who have helped me through this journey. I expect only one thing from myself, and that is to never quit learning about the beauty of fully living!