

From  
*When Postpartum Packs a Punch: Fighting Back and Finding Joy*  
By Kristina Cowan

My pregnancy with Noah was uncomplicated. We were healthy, as happy as two people sharing one body can be. I opted to induce labor 3 days before he was due. I wanted my OB, who was on call that day, to deliver him.

Picking a date to have my baby offered me the illusion of being in control. It put me at ease until the night before, when I couldn't sleep. I greeted induction day in a haze of nervous exhaustion. Soon after my husband, Matt, and I arrived at the Chicago hospital at 7 a.m., we learned I was already in the early stages of labor. To speed things along, the nurse hooked me up to a stream of Pitocin, a synthetic hormone that spurs labor (Weiss, 2016).

For the first few hours, the contractions were mild. Then, in what seemed to be an instant, they swelled to severe. Squatting and rocking to ease the pain, a slow panic crept over me. I had a *human being* inside of me. My body would have to contort and squeeze him out. But I felt as stiff as the icebergs lining Lake Michigan outside my hospital window.

I needed a strong dose of help.

I summoned the nurse and requested an epidural. It was a good move. Soon, I was ready to push. Three hours later, I was still pushing, with little sensation or progress. I hadn't eaten in 12 hours. The hormone-and-medicine cocktail that swirled in my body made me vomit. I was on the brink of fainting, and the baby's heart rate fell some. My doctor suggested forceps. She assured Matt and me that a simple nudge would loosen the baby.

An emergency C-section would be a last resort.

I trusted my doctor and agreed to the forceps.

A new, unfamiliar team descended on my room, including extra nurses and an anesthesiologist who boosted my epidural. The spike in drugs made me feel as if I were floating. I was strangely calm as I watched the doctor and a medical student lower two mammoth metal prongs into my body. They clamped and jostled my son's head, gashing his cheek and one of his ears. I pushed. The doctors pulled. Noah was born. Full of relief when I saw that he was okay, I exhaled. My physical torture was over—or so I thought. With the labor medication still in my system, I started postpartum painkillers. The sheer

excitement of it all, amplified by the drugs, sent me into a satisfied daze.

I had sustained a 3<sup>rd</sup>-degree tear from the forceps, but the doctors and nurses didn't explain what it might mean for me physically. In a dreamy state of ignorance, I sailed from delivery to recovery, celebrating Noah's healthy, dramatic arrival. Family called. Friends visited. Our joy multiplied. We had created a mini-us, one who existed only because of our union. We reveled in new-parent euphoria.

Not for long.

Though I was supposed to be in the hospital for 48 hours following the birth, I was ushered out after 36, because another mother needed the room. Besides, a nurse said, I'd be happier at home. Soon after returning to our high-rise apartment, my body failed. My bladder and bowels shut down, and I ballooned with fluid. Several times I called my OB, who suggested laxatives. They didn't work. In the wee hours, Matt and I headed to the ER. We brought our 3-day-old Noah, because no family had yet arrived to help look after him.

Inside the busy ER, a staffer started my paperwork. Eyeing Noah in his stroller, she said, "I wouldn't have my infant in here if I were you. All these germs? He could get sick."

I already was afraid that my condition would worsen, and I would die. Now I imagined Noah dying too. Tears streamed down my cheeks. She apologized and hustled to get us into a private waiting room.

Another ER attendant noticed that I was crying, and assumed we were there for Noah.

"What's wrong with your baby?" she asked.

"Nothing. He's perfect," I said. "I'm a mess, and I haven't learned how to pump milk yet. I'm worried that once the doctors see me here, my body won't be available to nurse him. What if he wakes up? He'll starve."

She ordered a breast pump and helped me learn to pump milk. I filled four ounces into a bottle, which is enough for a feeding. I clung to this small victory. Although Noah was asleep, he hadn't eaten in a few hours. If he did wake up, at least he would have food.

Even so, I worried. While I was pregnant, friends and family mentioned that if infants took a bottle or pacifier too soon, they might not readily return to the breast (a condition known as "nipple confusion"; Moreland & Coombs, 2000). I wanted to nurse him as long as

possible, and avoid bottles and formula. Reflecting on this now, I'm comforted. Despite the fright of my first days as a parent, I didn't lose hold of the finer points of Noah's well-being. My mothering instincts were intact.

As 2 more hours passed, we waited. Induced labor was easy, by comparison. I limped to and from the bathroom, seeking but not finding relief. My abdomen and lower back felt like a war zone, with fiery darts streaking from side to side.

Once the doctor arrived, she asked a nurse to drain my bladder. To the great surprise of us all, it held more than twice the amount considered full. It would be trickier to relax my bowels. The doctor tried to loosen them manually—the worst, most humiliating pain of my life—and sent me home with orders to take more laxatives.

Later that morning, Matt drove me three blocks to my OB's office, and I struggled to sit upright, preferring instead the fetal position. Jolted by my ashen appearance, my doctor said, "This isn't your fault. We need to blame someone, so let's blame me."

She explained that the trauma caused by the 3<sup>rd</sup>-degree tear made it difficult for me to go to the bathroom. The injury ultimately caused my bladder and bowels to stop working. She hooked me up to a transportable catheter, and instructed me to buy a few enemas, go home, and sit in a warm bath.

Her formula worked.

Three days later, my body was functioning and on the mend. But my emotions started to crumble. I feared something would happen to Noah. What if he fell down the trash chute? What if I hit him on the head with a frying pan? I thought my husband would discover that I was a terrible wife and mother, grow to hate me, and leave.

I rode a hormonal seesaw, crying at moments that would otherwise elicit a smile, such as when my father-in-law called to check on us, when a little girl on the street waved at me, when one of my clients sent a baby gift.

Worst of all, I saw myself as a failure. By inducing early, I had rushed my child into the world before he was ready. I wasn't able to give birth the "right" way. Now my mind was a coil of dark thoughts.

Silent suffering isn't my style. I didn't hide my tears. I shared my intrusive thoughts, as

they're called, with my husband, and with our families and friends. Eventually I called my OB. She was warm, nonjudgmental, and swift to act. Within a few days, I was taking antidepressants and visiting a therapist. The therapy went a long way to restoring my jilted sense of self-worth. The medicine quelled the constant crying. It also cast me onto an emotional tundra, and froze my capacity for laughter, tears, or any strong emotion.

I stopped taking the antidepressants after 4 months, and wrapped up therapy at the same time. A few months later, I thought my postpartum depression had reappeared. I developed a rash of unusual symptoms—fatigue, aching joints, and unexplained irritability. Some days, my attention crept down the dark alleys of memory. I would cry as I thought of how my parents had been mean-spirited to one another during their divorce. As their child, I wondered if I had a cruelty gene. Would I too hurt my own child and husband?

I went back to my OB, the doctor I trusted most. She ordered blood work to test my thyroid, and results showed it was imbalanced. I sought the help of an endocrinologist, who determined that as a result of the pregnancy, I had developed Hashimoto's disease, an autoimmune disorder. With Hashimoto's, the immune system attacks the thyroid gland, disrupting its ability to produce hormones. Over time, this leads to an underactive thyroid, also known as hypothyroidism, which slows down all of the body's processes, including brain function, heart rate, and metabolism. It can even mimic depression (Office on Women's Health, 2012).

I started medication to restore my thyroid shortly before Noah turned 1. Six months later, I felt much better. Treatment and time stitched my frayed ends, but I was fundamentally changed. Parts of me are stronger. Parts of me are still broken and messy. That's long been true. But motherhood forced me to admit it.

I'm glad.

It was easier to carry the weight of Noah's little life once I fessed up to my many imperfections.