

The Mask

By Laura Dobra

I step out of the car into a gloomy morning and my mask goes on. Reaching into the backseat to get Lily out, I plaster on the smile. Taking deep breaths, I wrangle with the seat belts for what seems like the millionth time.

‘Good morning!’ a mother with a chirpy voice says behind me, and I hit my head on the car door. Great. Mother’s group morning is starting out perfectly! Thank God Mum’s got Ella – I can’t deal with two kids today.

With Lily on my hip, I push open the child centre door, and instantly wish I’d stayed home. Familiar faces, happy to see me, all waiting expectantly for my smile that says, I love being a mum – let’s have a cuppa and talk babies for the next hour!

Socialising is the *last* thing I want to do, but I plonk Lily down on the mat amongst her friends and find a seat in the semi-circle of chairs.

I hide a yawn behind my fist and adjust my bra discreetly with my other hand. This bout of mastitis has been draining. The infection has almost cleared, but each time Lily breastfeeds it is agony and she senses my distress. My breasts feel like rockmelons, but Lily won’t feed properly. I get no relief. I don’t think I could handle the fevers and pain for a third time. I shudder at the possibility.

My thoughts are interrupted by sudden clapping and cooing because three-month-old Jayden has rolled over for the first time. Lily hasn’t rolled over yet. Ella was only four months when she did it. Lily is already five months old. Why haven’t I spent more time playing with Lily? I’m just so tired.

I would have stayed home but the Child Health Nurse is in today and she rang me *twice* yesterday. She wanted to make sure I would bring Lily in for her overdue and postponed (*my fault*) four-month check-up. The clinic door opens and Grace walks out looking smug with baby Holly in a carry sling.

‘How did it go Grace?’ asks another mum, Sarah.

‘Julie said Holly is doing so well, and just keep doing what I’m doing!’

‘Wow Grace, good on you,’ Sarah says and gives her a big smile.

Julie won't say that about me and Lily. I raged and swore at Lily this morning for throwing up on her pink floral dress. I wonder if the other mums can tell Lily is wearing the same yellow onesie from last week – unwashed.

'Hi, you can come in now', says Julie, holding the door open for me. She's smiling at me, so I re-adjust my mask, pick up Lily and try to look capable.

Julie goes to her desk and I sit down opposite her with Lily on my lap.

'So, how's little Lily going?' she asks me kindly.

'Good, good.'

My mask is fracturing - but it's only a hairline crack.

'Do you have any concerns about Lily's development or behaviour?'

'No.' I hesitate, looking at my stained jeans and fiddling with a loose thread. 'Well, I've had mastitis again, so breastfeeding has been hard. And she cries a lot - but Ella cried a bit too, so I guess she's okay.'

'We'll check bub's weight later, so you can be sure she's getting enough milk,' Julie says, sliding a form across the desk. 'But first, can I get you to answer these questions about the past seven days?'

Reluctantly, I pick up a pen, and without looking up at Julie, I start choosing from the four options for each statement:

'I have been able to laugh and see the funny side of things'. When did I last laugh? I choose 'Definitely not so much now'.

'Things have been getting on top of me'. *Yes, they have.*

'I have been so unhappy that I have been crying'. I pick 'Yes, quite often.'

Even though I've taken this questionnaire every time I've visited Julie with my girls, my responses are different this time. My chest feels tight. I know I've scored highly on the *Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale*. I can't have PND. I was fine with Ella! Shakily, I pass the paper back to Julie and she glances at it briefly. She looks at me.

'You're very unhappy, aren't you?' Julie says softly.

My lips tremble, my mask shatters, and I cry. Helplessness, fear and guilt spill out with my tears. How did this happen? Being a mum should be the most natural job in the world. I've failed. Julie hands me a tissue and I cling to it as though it's a white flag. I'm drowning but Julie has thrown me a life line.

'C'mon Lily, we're going to play with your friends!' I say, bustling her out of the car.

I'm carrying the usual house-worth of supplies needed to keep her fed, clean and happy as we head toward the centre. It's not heavy though, and we eagerly join the other mums and children gathered for a play date.

Six months ago, I was diagnosed with postnatal depression. Thanks to Julie, my GP and a wonderful psychologist, I think I'm finally beating this illness. Yes, I can say it, and I believe it now. It's an *illness*. At my worst, I wasn't the mother, wife or friend I wanted to be. I couldn't outrun the black cloud that was slowly sinking down, smothering me, and invading my thoughts.

Julie helped me. The doctors helped me, and so did my family and friends. They just needed to *know* I was ill. I'd known there was something wrong but the shame of not coping stopped me from speaking up.

We all head outdoors to the playground. The sunshine is warm on my face as I watch Lily play. She's a healthy, happy little girl. Sarah walks over and sits down next to me on the bench.

'Hey, how's it going?' she asks.

I smile at her.

'Good. Good, thanks.' I say.

I won't be needing my mask any longer.

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ⁱ Source: Cox, J. L., Holden, J. M., & Sagovsky, R. (1987). Detection of postnatal depression: Development of the 10-item Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 150, 782-786.