Postnatal Depression – by the mother of the mother

I am the mother of a mother. I carried the mother in my womb, I gave birth to her, I nursed her, I loved her and cared for her.

As she grew, she became the one all her friends went to in times of trouble. The one who was easily manipulated and bullied because of her kind, “wanting to help”, nature. The one with little self-confidence and low self-esteem. Not knowing about the bullying, I worked for years on her self confidence and self esteem.. And it seemed to be working!

She hid it from me. Deeper and deeper she fell into toxic friendships that little by little started the journey into severe anxiety. And I watched helplessly. Knowing something was wrong, but not knowing what – she would not tell me very much because she was scared of upsetting me and her father, because we were friends with parents of the toxic friends.

By the time she went to University she seemed stronger – but then we began to realise that she was only at University because she wanted to please us – her parents. It wasn’t what she wanted and she hated the course. And so she left and did other things ….

Then she got married – and we were happy for her. We loved her husband – but were not so happy about his parents, who we had only heard negative things about. His anxiety and lack of self-esteem were, it seemed, a direct result of their apparently bullying and shouting tactics as parents. These tactics ran alongside an attitude of “doing everything for him” rather than teaching him how to do things, which just exacerbated his low self-esteem.

So not the best of matches – two lovely people who had similar, though different, issues with self-esteem and self-confidence. But they were friends, and they loved each other.

One night, my daughter’s mother in law, decided to “lose it” with her, and tell her how useless she was; what an awful wife she was, and how she didn’t look after her son properly.

I was left to pick up the pieces – my girl, who I had worked so hard trying to build her up, was shot down, broken, cutting herself, sobbing. That woman destroyed everything I had done.

My first instinct was to kill her. Truly. I didn’t. I wish now that I had gone and spoken to her, but I didn’t. I didn’t trust myself to be able to be rational.

Then the baby happened. Exciting for us to be grandparents, and really good for the two of them – responsibilities and caring for a child would be wonderful, and I knew they would make good parents.

A very sick pregnancy, but a lovely water birth, and our granddaughter appeared. All was well. For the first two or three weeks, our daughter wasn’t feeling good – she was struggling with breastfeeding and very tired. I did all the housework and cooking and washing, and left them alone to bond as a family. The “in-laws” came to visit on the days I wasn’t there, and every time I got back I was regaled with how bad it had been, and what things they had done, and in hindsight my reactions probably didn’t help this explosive situation. But really – do you walk in and grab a new baby off it’s mother? Do you make fun of how your son is doing things with his baby daughter?

As time went by it became obvious to me that my daughter was not coping with motherhood mentally, although she was a wonderful mother. I tried to help as much as I could, I would take my granddaughter out for long walks in the pram so that my daughter could have some time for herself.

And then the mother in law struck again. Partly full of jealousy because I had been there for my daughter through everything, and for other reasons (which were wrong), but the effects were as before. I drove back with my husband from a meeting to pick up the pieces again. It was the trigger that sparked the seeds of postnatal depression into growth, although for a while I didn’t realise that. I just had to cope with my daughter’s changing moods and outbursts, and her worries about her in laws.

But as the time for her to go back to work came, the next trigger kicked in – she went back to work for three days, and then realised she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t leave her baby.

And that was it. Would she have had postnatal depression without those triggers? We will never know. But from the time that the mother in law struck for the second time, my life became split. Going home to my husband at night and acting normally so as not to worry him; during the day watching, worrying, crying inside, not knowing what to say because whatever I said or didn’t say was wrong. Listening to rants about in laws, but not able to say anything myself. Although at times I couldn’t help myself.

I was two people. I guess the experience taught me patience. I had to be calm, I had to learn to behave differently. I had to watch without being seen to be watching – if my daughter became angry or frustrated with her baby, I had to work out what to do – what should I do? I walked on eggshells for almost 12 months. Now it’s a blurred memory, and only the odd snippets in my diary remind me of how hard it was; how much helplessness I felt; how much crying in the car that I did on the way home.

Once she had been diagnosed, life became a little easier. Drugs helped, but more than that a wonderful private psychologist helped as there was a huge NHS waiting list.

There were times when my daughter took all of her anxiety and depression out on me, I was accused of many things. I would go home sobbing in the car – wondering where I had gone wrong, how had I failed this wonderful woman so badly as a mother?

I constantly questioned my own sanity at times. I questioned my mothering skills, my knowledge, my hatred of the in laws.

Life has moved on as I write this. The anxiety and depression have faded. I have my amazing strong daughter back, and a happy and cheerful granddaughter. We have a connection. All three of us. I am Mother to the Mother of the Child.

But I cannot move on from my lack of forgiveness for the woman who triggered this. The woman who has done this to my daughter not once, but twice. The reasons actually matter not. It is her basic lack of understanding, of compassion; the absolutely appalling explosions of awfulness to another woman who is not even her own daughter. And she has never apologised to me. She has apologised to my daughter, but not to me. The Mother. The one who had to be there, frightened and scared, not knowing how to deal with the debris that was left; the aftermath.

I know that I have to move on, that I have to forgive. But I will never forget, and I will always live with the fear that the trigger can be pulled again. That fear cannot be erased. The lioness needed to protect her cub and could not retaliate. I cannot forgive myself for not being able to protect my child.

As a mother I could not fight back – I was and am helpless. Postnatal depression is not something that can be fought; you can only listen and watch, and silently pray that it won’t come back. And that the safety catches are on for the triggers.