

I'M FINE

(and other lies)

POSTNATAL DEPRESSION,
MOTHERHOOD
AND TRYING TO
ACTUALLY BE FINE

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WILD
DINGO
PRESS 

A word on depression

Everyone who goes through depression experiences it differently.

This is my story. I'm sharing my lowest points, my struggles and the mistakes I've made along the way (eek!), in the hope that you can use it to find your own way through with a little less struggle or, at the least, to feel a little less alone.

Most of all, I've written this book to help you (and me) realise that you are not your own enemy. To show us all that, when we're struggling, there are options to ask for help and to help ourselves.

If at any point you start thinking about ending your own life, harming yourself or your child, or thinking your child might be better off without you, please: get help immediately. You can call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or, for emergencies, call 000.

Wherever you are on your path to greater mental health, I wish you all the best.

And in the words of the wise: go gently.

For Steve, Abbey and Iris

My struggles came from within; it is because of you that I healed

Prologue

‘You have clinical depression.’

When I walked into the GP’s office, I knew the diagnosis was coming; I’d self-diagnosed long before going in for a mental health plan. Still, it was confronting to hear it come out of a professional’s mouth as a formal diagnosis; I sat in that room, staring at the bare white wall. Holding it together, not sobbing as my mind ached to.

The tough girl act: that’s my thing.

I told you not to come here, told you it would only cause more pain.

Depression. It was finally official, and I was surprised to find myself, well, surprised. I think part of me had been hoping the doctor would say, ‘There’s nothing wrong with you!’ and I’d walk out of there feeling miraculously pleased that it was all in my imagination. Move along, nothing to see here.

As it turned out, I was the classic case for postnatal depression and, with every question I answered, the doctor raised her eyebrows a little further. Family history? Yes. Perfectionism? It’s a lifelong habit. Defined by external factors, like work? Yep. Hard on yourself? Oh, definitely. Eventually, when the doctor’s eyebrows were so overworked they wouldn’t go any higher, she simply sat back in her chair and shook her head—it was no shock to her that I was suffering. It was likely the only surprise was that it had taken me so long to face up to it.

And maybe she was a little shocked that I was still alive.

My oldest child was, by this point, eight years old and I was only just coming to terms with having had postnatal depression after both my babies. I'd told myself and everyone around me for the best part of a decade that I was almost better; I'd just turned a corner, I could feel the difference now, I was fine.

I'm fine.

No, I was not fine. I'd been living an internal battle so intense and so long-lasting that it had forced me to live silently in pain for years.

And the game was up.

Two days before this, I lay in bed, purposely studying the ceiling fan go round and round—focusing on how weird it was that if I squinted my eyes I could see little fox nose and ear shapes on the blades—to distract myself from making decisions about whether to stay alive or not.

How had things got so bad?

And how could I ever recover enough to learn how to live, not in in the midst of silent battle anymore, but out loud?



FLUID-RETAINING, PUFFY LEGS PADDLING

I slept through my first labour.

Eventually a midwife woke me. ‘It’s time to push,’ she said, pointing to the machine that was monitoring my baby. It showed contraction after contraction, spiking and declining with mountainous patterns like the heart rate machines on medical shows. Beside the machine was my husband, Steve’s, face, watching me closely, complete with massive eye bags from worry and exhaustion; it appeared that while I’d been sleeping he’d been on high alert. Taking one for the team, you could say, which was only fair because—apparently—I was about to push an entire human through my hoo-ha.

‘How am I going to push?’ I asked, bleary eyed and worried. ‘I can’t feel a thing.’

The nurse glanced at the other machine I was hooked up to and gasped. ‘Oops!’ (Oops? That’s one word you don’t want to hear in a hospital.)

‘We turned the epidural up too high,’ she explained, dashing off and returning with a piece of ice. She ran it down my legs to illustrate her point: normally people can feel something, but I felt nothing at all. Not a pinch, not a cringe of ice coldness. ‘This is going to be tricky,’ she added.

No kidding.

I spent the next two hours trying to push, but not sure if I was doing anything right. ‘Just imagine you’re doing a big poo,’ was the advice, and so began my very glamorous journey into motherhood.

After twenty-four hours of labour my baby was, at last, coming out of my body—without me feeling a thing. I was numb when woken from my long slumber, numb as my body was ripped open, numb as the stitches were put in place with great concentration and imperfection.

‘It’s a girl.’

It was four forty-nine a.m. on the ninth of September, 2008, and I was a mum.

You know you’re going to suck at this, right? a little voice piped up from somewhere deep down, as though it had been birthed from inside me alongside my beautiful, perfect baby.



On the surface, I started motherhood with ease. (Sleeping during the labour was a good clue that this would be the case.)

No one was more surprised by this than me. I was never a typical maternal type—kids aren’t drawn to me and, even in my childhood, I preferred to sit invisibly alongside the adults; listening in to what adults say when they think kids aren’t

listening seemed a much more valuable life skill than playing silly games with the other kids.

I'd wanted to be a mum. Motherhood was on my life's to-do list—it was even up there in the top ten—but it was definitely ranked after 'travel the world' and 'climb the career ladder'. I figured I'd get to it in my late-thirties, when everything else had been methodically ticked off.

That all changed when I got spooked by fertility problems and decided to do it before it was too late. I found myself, at age twenty-eight, in a hospital bed holding a precious little (well, not comparatively speaking: my first baby was four-and-a-half kilos; ten pounds) newborn.

Those very early days, they were pretty good. Most women say they're the hardest part—and understandably so—but, for me, they were the simplest and most innocent.

I picked my baby up from the hospital crib with a firm hand behind her head, patted her to sleep, and watched adoringly as I learnt that a baby's hiccups are the most beautiful thing in the world. I changed her nappies with ease, laughingly took photos as she cried—'That'll be a good one for her twenty-first!'—and burped her over my shoulder as instructed.

My mum had prepared me for the delayed gratification that giving birth can bring. 'With all four of you,' she told me, 'I had the nurses take you away until I was ready for you ... after a cup of tea.' She reported what lots of mums say in hushed tones to each other: that the almighty love a mother is expected to feel for her newborn doesn't always come straight away. I was ready for that, but instead I had a text book experience: a rush of love like I'd never felt before and a desperate desire

to never let this perfect bundle leave my arms. Her little facial expressions, blurry gazes, arm jolts and even her cries were fascinating. I didn't want to look away in case I missed something.

I was doing it so easy that the nurses in the maternity ward had a nickname for me. 'We give each other a rundown of each mum when we change shifts,' one confided, 'with instructions of what everyone needs help with. But when we get to you we laugh; Multi, we say, she has everything under control.'

'Multi?' I queried.

'Multi, as in multiple,' she said. 'We're all sure you've done this multiple times; first time mums are never this confident.'

It was true. I'd thrown myself into the role without hesitation, and my baby girl was a willing participant. She breastfed well from the first moment I placed her on me, slept like a baby in the truest intention of the saying, and all arrows pointed to a sign marked 'Smooth Sailing'.

I pushed aside the feeling inside myself that said, over and over again, *You're fooling them all*.

I chose instead to feel proud of myself: look at me go, two days into this gig and already parenting like a pro. Well, a pro duck, at least, with a calm exterior and (fluid-retaining, puffy) legs paddling madly under the surface.



The drive home from the hospital, winding our way from suburbia back up the hills, was the slowest of our lives. Steve and I were certain that every car within three hundred metres was going to crash into not just our car, but directly into our

I'M FINE (AND OTHER LIES)

baby. Why was everyone driving so fast? Were they always this aggressive on the road? Why were they sitting so close behind us? It was a relief to get home, pull into the driveway and have our precious bundle back in my arms, safe from all those mad drivers on the streets of the big, bad world.

Being at home with a baby was like existing in an alternate universe. Home was the same as it had been when I'd left, in labour and scared for what was about to happen, but I'd changed so much in those two days.

I was re-entering the real world, now with an added babe in arms, and it was terrifying. The world felt too fast, too loud, too over-the-top, and far too much like it used to be. How could everything around me have stayed the same while I'd transformed? The world seemed oblivious to the fact that something life-altering had just happened.

Physically, it was all new, too. My ankles were puffier than they had been during the pregnancy (and that's saying something), the pain around my vagina was so intense that I walked like I'd been horse riding for a week, and my boobs were leaking. Surely just one of those things was enough to put me in bed and have someone do everything for me. But no one seemed too fussed; even the maternal and child health nurse, who made an appearance a couple of days into our new home life, had a look at me, a good feel of my abdomen ('Mmmm, that feels like it's all coming together,' she muttered to herself; I couldn't help but wonder *what* it was that was coming together), and she seemed satisfied that all was as it should be.

'But did you see these?' I pleaded, pointing to my tree trunk limbs. 'There used to be ankles there.'

‘It’ll all come back,’ she smiled (a little condescendingly, it must be said) and left.

Were they really going to leave us in charge of this little being? Shouldn’t someone who knows what they’re doing be there to supervise? What if we did the wrong thing: who would jump in to stop us? The midwives had said I was confident and ready to do this, but I wasn’t so sure.

Being allowed to look after this baby felt like we’d passed some sort of test, although I couldn’t help but feel we’d somehow cheated; we’d soon be found out and reported to some parenting committee as fraudulent. ‘You are charged,’ an expert in a court of parenting law might say, ‘with having no idea what you are doing. How do you plead?’

Guilty. So, so guilty.

I can’t believe you’re trying to pull this off, that little voice whispered.

There’s no doubt that you’re going to stuff this up.

I’d even confessed my imposter syndrome to a friend on the quiet. ‘I’m just making it up as I go along,’ I whispered, looking from side to side in case that parenting committee had bugged my house and would urgently radio to the police: ‘FOUND! A mum who’s pretending to know what she’s doing but actually has no idea!’ I’d be done for.

But no armed forces kicked in my front door, no-one arrested me, and my friend didn’t even look shocked. ‘That’s good,’ she said in an encouraging sort of tone. Good? ‘That’s what parenting IS! We’re all making it up as we go!’

Seriously?

Are all these children really being raised, all around the

I'M FINE (AND OTHER LIES)

country, around the *world*, by people who have no idea what they're doing? The world is out of control, I felt, it's jumped the shark, everyone's gone crazy to let this go on.

I took to what would become my daily habit for a while: putting my baby down on her play gym mat, lying next to her in my baggy grey trackies and whatever t-shirt had been nearest on the bedroom floor that morning, watching in awe as she kicked her roly-poly legs uncontrollably, jerked her dimpled fists around, gurgled and learnt to so cleverly focus on the toys dangling from above. I could watch her all day, and some days I did.

I couldn't believe we'd created this little piece of heaven. I adored her.