

02/08/09 - Masked Emotions of New Motherhood



Once a couple has adopted a baby, they will be overcome with happiness. They will be able to look at their baby and instantly know that their baby was always meant to be theirs. Maternal and Paternal instincts will kick in for these new parents. Bonding with the baby will be so easy for these new parents because they finally have a child. This is the one thing they have worked so hard for and waited so long to receive. Love and happiness will be abounding.

This is what I thought would happen after adopting our first child. Of course, I'd be thrilled. Of course I'd fall madly in love with the baby. Of course, I'd bond instantly because this baby was all mine. Did this happen? Not exactly. Did I know that I may not feel happy? Not at all. Did I feel like an awful person that I didn't feel a connection with this baby I'd wanted so badly? Absolutely.

For our first adoption we pursued a domestic newborn program with a private agency. Amazingly we were selected by Birthparents within three weeks of completing the paperwork. We then had two months before the birth to get to know the Birthparents. We spoke to them almost every other day and traveled to their home state once prior to delivery to get to know them even better. We all got along wonderfully.

The time at the hospital for the scheduled C-Section was emotionally draining. We

were there for the entire duration the Birthparents were there. I was in the Operation Room for the delivery and we hung out in the Birthmother's suite with the Birthparents and the baby for three days until her release. This was an amazing and nervous time for everyone involved. I could tell the Birthparents were enjoying their time with the baby but also were saying good-bye to him at the same time.

After the Birthmother's discharge, my husband, P, and I took the baby back to our hotel room as the Birthparents went to sign their parental relinquishment papers. P was so excited to finally have a baby of his own. I was excited for P to be a Father. But I didn't feel like a Mother. The Mother was the one who an hour before placed this baby in my arms while weeping from her soul and saying, "Please take good care of my little boy." Even though I knew the Birthparents at that exact time were signing papers so P and I could adopt this beautiful boy, I couldn't stop feeling like I had just stolen this baby from the Birthparents.

After P and I officially signed our paperwork to adopt our new Son, we spent just over a week in a hotel before the ICPC allowed us to travel home. P loved having our Son, K, all to ourselves. He was beaming like I would picture any new Father would. I, on the other hand, felt like I was going through the motions that I thought a Mother should. I was oohing and aahing and talked to K in a sing song voice. Yet, when I looked at him I would hear the Birthmother's crying and imagined the sadness that the Birthparents were feeling. I was overcome with guilt that I could be happy when someone that I had come to care for was in so much emotional pain.

Never had I expected to feel this way. I had some friends who after giving birth to a child said that they felt like a babysitter at first because they couldn't believe that they had a baby. But I didn't feel like a babysitter. I felt like a thief. What gave me the right to take this baby away from a loving couple? How dare I be celebrating when across town a woman was recovering from birth but has no baby to show for

it?

At the hotel, I began to withdraw from P and K. I spent lots of time in the bathroom crying to myself. I didn't want to express my feelings to others because I didn't want anyone to think I didn't want to adopt this baby. I couldn't say that I was scared by my thoughts because I was worried they wouldn't think I was a fit parent. I had no clue why my emotions were all over the place when I was not the one who had just given birth. Physically, I was normal so why was I feeling like a mess?

I did open up to P eventually and he kept reassuring me that we did not "steal" this baby. The Birthparents willingly chose adoption. They chose us. They signed the paperwork without being forced. Logically, I knew all of that was true. But my heart wasn't listening to my brain.

P didn't feel as much emotional pain as I did for the Birthparents, especially for the Birthmother. I think my sympathy for her was connected to residual feelings from our years of infertility struggles. A baby was the thing I wanted most in this world so I could only imagine the hurt the Birthmother had felt by placing her baby in another woman's arms.

Once the three of us did arrive home, I put on a happy face as we heard "Congratulations" from friends and family. Having some physical distance from the Birthparents seemed to give me some clarity on the situation and things seemed slightly better. Still I did not speak about these depressed feelings to anyone but P. I was still worried about being judged by others. So when I felt like I was unable to care for K because the sadness was overwhelming, I just made sure someone could take a baby shift and I'd go nap and stay in my bedroom.

I felt like this for the first two months of K's life. The outside world would have just seen a tired and overwhelmed new mom. Only I knew that internally I was struggling with looking at my Son and thinking that if I gave him back to his

Birthparents they wouldn't be in pain anymore. I did talk to the Birthparents a few times a week to let them know how K was doing. I could tell it was hard for them to ask questions but they were happy to hear the answers.

At one point, I recall asking the Birthmother how she was feeling. She said that she was definitely depressed. But thanks to the counseling from our adoption agency prior and post birth she knew that what she was feeling was normal for Birthmothers. She knew it was going to get better with time and counseling. Hearing her say that made me feel as if I was given the O.K. from her to stop feeling sad for her.

Very soon after that phone call I had a dream I'll never forget. In the dream, I was in a Doctor's office with K in my arms. Then I looked down and K was gone. I raced around the Doctor's building looking for K and screaming his name. I could not find him. I woke up from the dream and sat up with my heart racing. I had tightness in my chest and heart that I was unfamiliar with. I could barely catch my breath but could say out loud, "I am a Mom. I am a Mom." That feeling I had was Maternal instinct. Not being to find my Son in my dream had finally brought it out in me. For two months I admired K but never felt like I had the right to love him. That dream seemed to have snapped me out of all of my sadness and finally brought me into embracing Motherhood.

It was well over a year later that I ran across some adoption literature on Post Adoption Depression (PAD). I read the symptoms and was shocked to learn that I had experienced it. I was disappointed that I was unaware of it before K's adoption. Plus, I was mad at myself for not opening up about those feelings when I had them so I could have received help. It was refreshing to learn that I wasn't alone with my thoughts. At that point I wanted to make sure to let couples who were adopting know about PAD so unlike me, they could reach out for help in their time of need.

PAD is a very real emotional syndrome that can affect anyone who adopts. This includes domestic and international adoptions. PAD can be brought on by the

overwhelming task of parenthood, dealing with a child's medical issues, feeling guilty, or any other reason. It can be treated with counseling and/or medication.

I feel it's important to learn about PAD and also to let your loved ones know about it. Your friends and family may not think it's possible for you to have something that resembles Post Partum Depression when you didn't deliver a baby. They may not think that you can have something like PAD when you came home with a two year-old child. Let them know that PAD does exist and encourage them to look for signs of it. They may not understand what the new Mother is thinking but are able to rally her to speak openly to her adoption social worker. She will not be judged by her PAD, but will receive the help that any new Mother should receive.

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A good book on this topic is "The Post Adoption Blues" by Karen J. Foli, Ph.D. and John R. Thompson, M.D. (2004).

