



## Just Show Up: A Love Story

For months, I felt no connection whatsoever to my newborn son. Then one day an idea took hold that changed everything. *by* JOY PESKIN

**T**rying to remember the exact moment I fell in love with my son, Nathaniel, is hard. It might have been when he appeared to be listening intently as I read him my favorite book from childhood, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It might have been during the walk when he reached out from his baby carrier and grabbed my finger. But I know for sure that it wasn't the first time I held my child—and the shock I felt at not experiencing the rush of love I had anticipated upon becoming a mother was staggering.

Even though I had a cesarean section, I still expected to see Nathaniel right away. I imagined he'd be lifted over the curtain and placed onto my chest. He'd open his eyes, and we'd look at each other, and the collective wisdom of generations of mothers who had come before me would beam into my heart.

Instead, my son and I had our first meeting in the recovery room at the hospital, hours after his birth. My parents and my husband were there. A nice nurse kept asking me where I was on the pain scale from one to ten. Someone handed

the baby to me at some point, but the memory is elusive, just beyond my reach.

The last thing I recall clearly was being in the operating room. The baby had just been delivered, but he wasn't crying yet; the nurses were still clearing out his mouth. I was shaking violently, either from fear or from all the drugs that had been pumped into my system. I begged the anesthesiologist to do something for my nausea. Before she added another drug to my IV, I heard a nurse asking my doctor the reason for the C-section, presumably for hospital paperwork. "It's late and I wanted to go home," he said. I suppose he was joking, but after 36 hours of labor, I wasn't really in the mood to laugh.

In the blurry weeks that followed, I went over the events of that day in my mind like a crime-scene investigator, trying to figure out exactly when something had gone horribly wrong. Because something was clearly horribly wrong. When I held Nathaniel, I felt a pounding, all-consuming anxiety. One word thrummed through my head like a drumbeat: escape. I wanted to put Nathaniel in his crib, walk out the door, and never come back. When we took him for his first checkup, I sincerely hoped the doctor would see that I was not up for the challenge of motherhood and allow us to leave the baby there.

What kind of mother was I? What kind of person was I? *You're a monster*, I told myself. *A monster who doesn't love her own child*. It didn't make sense. I had always thought of myself as the kind of woman who was born to be a mother. But here I was, desperately plotting my escape from the role I had craved most in life.

When my husband took pictures of me with the baby, I tried to force my



"I felt as if I were on fire," the author says about the photo above; in the other, taken a few months later, her depression had finally started to lift.



face into a smile, but my eyes told the truth. They were flat and empty. My voice sounded like it was coming from down a long tunnel. I had no appetite. Food tasted wrong.

A few friends suggested that I might have postpartum depression, but I didn't think so. That felt like a crutch, an excuse. Besides, I wasn't crying all the time. I wasn't crying at all. I was just sitting there, either numb or panicking, incapable of doing anything right. I wasn't sick. I was useless.

*I can't do this. I won't do this.* These words ran through my mind day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute. Every time the phone rang, I hoped it was someone calling to rescue me. Friends came and visited, but they always left. "Take me with you," I remember begging one of them. I tried to pretend I was joking, but I wasn't.

I was feeling worse after a few weeks, so I called a psychopharmacologist I

had seen a few years back. She was straightforward and told me that with the right medication, I would feel just like my old self. I didn't believe her. My old self was gone—I was sure of that.

I went back to a therapist I had seen before my marriage, but she had become, over time, more a friend than a counselor. I was ashamed for her to see me in my current state. I went once and didn't return.

Next I tried an old-school psychoanalyst. Dr. Freud, as my husband called him, was warm and reassuring, but he wanted to talk about my childhood and I wanted to focus on the present. By this point, Nathaniel was more than 2 months old. I feared that if I didn't get better soon, I'd never bond with him. Also, my maternity leave was coming to an end. I needed to take a more aggressive approach.

A friend had given me the phone number of a postpartum-depression hotline, and I carried it with me for weeks before I got up the nerve to call. When I finally did, a kind woman assured me that I did have PPD, and that it was surmountable. The other doctors I had seen told me that too, but

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she was the first one I really believed. She told me she heard women say exactly what I was saying all the time. I had felt so alone in my dark, ugly thoughts, but she had personally talked to other women who had gone through exactly what I was going through. They had gotten better, and I would get better too.

The woman from the hotline suggested a therapist specializing in PPD. When I called her, she told me that the fact that I experienced guilt over my negative feelings about motherhood was a good sign. It meant I didn't want to feel that way. And she told me she had also had PPD, and she had gotten over it and had gone on to have a second child. On my first visit, she gave me her personal copy of Brooke Shields's book about postpartum depression, *Down Came the Rain*. After reading the book and with the therapist's counseling, I started to feel better. I went back on the antidepressant I'd been taking before I got pregnant, which made a big difference.

And something else helped me too: a line from an article I read about Rosanne Cash. When describing her work ethic, she said, "Just show up. Just do it. Even if you feel like s--- and you think you're terrible and you'll never get better and it will never go anywhere, just show up and do it. And, eventually, something happens." That spoke to me. I felt like a terrible mother and I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't figure out which cry meant "I'm hungry" and which meant "I'm tired." I couldn't get the baby wrap to work. I didn't know how often to bathe him, or when to put him down for a nap, or whether to put him in pajamas or to let him sleep in a diaper. I was sure that if left alone in my care, he would die. But when my mind started with its refrain of *I can't do this, I won't do this*, I thought of that quote from Rosanne Cash. *Just show up*, I told myself instead. *Just do it*. So I did. And she was right:

Something happened. I started to get the hang of it.

I turned a corner when Nathaniel was 3 months old and I returned to work. I love my job, so going back to it—and going back to my pre-baby routine—made me happy. Ultimately, I rediscovered my confidence, which had felt as if it had been put into a car, driven into the middle of the desert, and set on fire.

It took me a while to come to terms with what happened during the earliest days of my child's life. More than once, I've found myself wishing I had known him when he was first born. And of course that's foolish, because I was right there. But also, I wasn't. To see us together these days, you'd never know. When he smiles my heart bursts, like fireworks, into a thousand tiny stars. I love nothing more than snuggling with him or reading to him. And I guess I'll never understand exactly what went wrong, whether I was traumatized by the C-section, or if I experienced some sort of hormonal crash, or if people with my type A personality—those of us who like to do things perfectly on the first try, who like to be in control—are just destined for a certain degree of panic when we become mothers and lose control of absolutely everything.

I thought I would fall in love with my baby the first time he was in my arms. But that didn't happen. It couldn't happen until the thing that broke in me when he came into the world was fixed. But I love him now, boundlessly and without reservation. And maybe in the end what matters most isn't the moment we fall in love, but what we do with that love once it takes hold. 😊

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The author narrates a striking slideshow of images chronicling her depression—and her recovery—on our iPad edition. Download it at [parents.com/digitalextras](http://parents.com/digitalextras).

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