

# Stronger

I had my first son at 25 and had a touch of PND, but it was fine. My baby nurse and I kept an eye on it... it went away. When I had my second son 20 months later, I realised something was wrong when I spent all day screaming at my toddler. I went to see my child health nurse; she recognised PND and helped me. After 12 months of hell, we all came out of it. I ended up on medication really early on; I was going to the Sunbury PND group and having individual counselling. My baby was about six weeks old. I was told later that I was very close to being hospitalised. At the end of my PND, while still at the group, I got sick with thyroid issues. I was a part of the support group for about 12 months and then my private counselling was finished and I was feeling okay. I think the mixture of the medication, the support group and individual counselling is what helped me through PND. It was hard. When you start to recover, you feel good one day, the next day is shit again, and it feels worse. But the good days get longer and the bad days are less and less.

Walking into the support group on the first day was daunting. But unlike the movies you see of help groups where you are forced to talk; you just sat and talked if you wanted to, it wasn't as hard once you were there. It was a small group at first but then grew to about 20 when everyone was there. It was helpful, friendly and supportive. The support and interaction with other mums was good. I made some friends who I spoke to outside of the group they also helped me through my cancer treatment. Sometimes our children played together.

The only people who knew I had PND were my mum and husband. I didn't tell anyone at the time. I didn't want people to look down on me and I wasn't thinking straight. So it was encouraging to find others who knew what you were going through. It's isolating – depression – we were told just get out of the house, even if it's just the backyard. Others were going through worse than me which was confronting. If someone was having a distressing day and yours was okay, it was difficult to see.

With a PND group there is no judgment because everyone understands. You need to know you're not the only one. It is really isolating. It may be the only time you leave your house. Even leaving the front door is hard. I would often access an online support group which didn't have a facilitator and whilst it was good to know someone was always there (24/7), women often enabled each other [in a negative way]. Facilitators can make you accountable by putting in place strategies that would help you help yourself.

I believe every woman with PND should at least have a counsellor and absolutely a face-to-face support group. It must be run by someone trained not just a group of women on their own so that conversation doesn't become unhelpful. We couldn't use excuses to behave badly. The Counsellor challenged us to think about how to help ourselves. The group filled a need. Beyond that, you need a counsellor and a good GP. Good GPs do as much counselling as counsellors.

Seventeen years on and I'm happy! [I have] a loving husband who stuck by me and two wonderful kids. I learnt a lot of things about life, about me, about my family and self-worth that I still use today. I also didn't think I could do it [parenting] but I did. If I could go back, I'd tell myself, 'It's okay! You can actually do this.' Then maybe I wouldn't have been so anxious about it all. The kids are good – cheeky and sarcastic. They have these comebacks all the time and they throw your words back at you. They're too quick for me now.

I wouldn't choose to have it but if I could go back, I wouldn't change it. I think it made me stronger. It was so bloody hard, an awful 12 months but I learnt a lot that I wouldn't have. Life lessons, in my experience, are so damn hard! If not for the PND, I wouldn't have had the support around me when I got thyroid cancer.

My one reflection that I would share with a mum experiencing PND is that life does get better. Having children was worth the PND.