

It Takes a Village

By

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Do you like your son" asked my therapist four years on. Her question rattled me.

" I love him to bits! "

This child whose birth had turned my life around completely, was also the buoy that kept me from drowning in the miseries of a disabled person's hardships and daily struggles.

" He's my whole heart" I replied more to myself than to the therapist. Perhaps she thought I would blame my child for my disability, as it is the result of a post-partum stroke.

Until five years ago, my husband and I had nearly given up on the dream of ever becoming parents.

The chronology is important here, so four years into our marriage we had already dealt with all the advice and the questions that our society asks of childless couples. We had become rather brazen in our explanations of why there was no baby.

" We do it every day, there's something wrong with our systems", my husband had started spitting out in response to questions directed mainly towards me. A childless, married woman bears the disapproval of everyone around her, even if she has other qualities to her name. I was a well-educated, confident, skilled, working woman when I married him. Years later, we had grown together and appreciated our life together. Once we started trying for a child, we realised it wasn't going to happen for us. While this hurdle did not unsettle us, it did become a rather serious issue for both our families.

His mother couldn't understand why I wasn't sobbing and distressed at the idea. My mother worried if he'd stay married to me if I couldn't give him a child. Many doctor-visits and a gruelling fertility treatment later, we finally got pregnant in the eighth year of our marriage - which is awfully late by Pakistani standards.

"Pela bacha hun kero gay te duja kaddon howay ga" aunties on both sides of the family were very concerned about when a second child would come if the first was coming so late.

It's a harsh culture, with no boundaries and a pathological obsession with child bearing as a young couple's only aim in life. The obsession is so entrenched, people often appear as concerned about other's offspring as their own. Which was rather annoying for this young couple, but they took things in their stride as they waited on their baby's arrival. And he came, after months riddled with morning sickness that often never subsided by my evenings, and a baby bump too large for my petite five-foot frame, the baby came on a foggy November morning. I had needed a Caesarean which would protect the child but meant several weeks of recovery for me. It's a society where unwelcome opinions form the majority of conversation and younger people are expected to not react to anything said by the elders even if it is unsuitable, unwelcome or technically incorrect. My doctor had given me sufficient information to allow me to make an informed decision on how to deliver the baby. I opted for a Caesarean. It's safe to say, my mother in law objected to the idea and brought up all kinds of anecdotal evidence - according to her - how that is a bad idea. But my husband and I were certain we wanted the surgery as it is safest for the baby. A baby we were getting after eight years.

The child has been my strength and my joy but a week after I had him, I suffered a massive stroke. Which didn't kill me, but very nearly did. A large bleed

in my brain left me paralysed on the left side of my body. So, I couldn't care for my new-born. Strokes like mine are little understood in Pakistan. Not only was I paralysed, I had also lost all sensory and spatial awareness in half my body. Despite the excruciatingly difficult scenario I now found myself in, I was still the *babu* of a traditional family. Which expected their daughters-in-law to be up and about within days of delivering a baby and to look presentable when relatives came to the hospital to see the baby. Only I couldn't. I couldn't even sit up.

And so, they saw, judged, whispered, checked if I truly did lose all feelings in half my body. But the cooing of the baby gave me hope. New life gave me energy despite all I had lost. Postpartum strokes are rare but devastating as they leave a new mom in a position of severe vulnerability and dependence, as they now need people to care for the baby and for themselves. As tragic as I felt my situation was, a quick Google search told me I was lucky to be alive. In fact, less than five percent of women experience a stroke postpartum. But only 40 percent survive the massive bleed I had experienced in my brain.

“So, I'm one of the two in five people that survive a brain injury this severe,” I told my husband smugly. “I'm sorry you'll have to take care of the baby on your own.”

“Don't worry. I'm so happy you're here with us. Nothing else matters.” he reassured me.

My mother took care of the baby for the first year. My cousin took the baby home with her so my family could look after their newly paralysed daughter who was still recovering from her c-section. My husband was, and still is, strong as a rock in supporting me as I go through the various stages of physical recovery as well as the emotional tides and redevelopment of personality after major trauma.

My sibling-like best friend moved in with us to help me and the baby. She is a third parent to our little boy.

They say you need a village to raise a baby. As he turns five soon, I'm eternally grateful to my village, all of whom have stepped up in ways I never thought they had the capacity for. What I've learnt from my health scare is, we often fail to recognise our blessings and sometimes it takes one of us nearly dying, to jolt our tribe into action. But they do, when we're in need, when the time comes, our village arrives in full force, to not just raise the child but to rehabilitate the mother and set her back up to a life she can manage on her own. I am truly grateful to God for blessing me with people who took care of us and five years in, still haven't tired of offering help whenever I need it.

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