



The rise of POST-BRIDAL DEPRESSION

Your wedding is supposed to be the happiest moment of your life, but what about the withdrawal that follows the intense high of the big day?
Emma Laurence reports on the darker side of happily-ever-after

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My wedding day, three months ago, was without a doubt the best day of my life so far. From the minute I woke up, tired from weeks of broken sleep but with an energy like nothing I'd felt before, I was riding high. No seating-plan emergency or wardrobe malfunction could shake me. I laughed and danced and twirled until my head hit the pillow. This was it: my happy-ever-after, the first day of the rest of my life.

But as the next few weeks unfolded, every stitch in the fabric of that beautiful day started to squirm and struggle and unravel inside my mind. I spent the majority of our honeymoon picking at those stitches, looking for holes in them instead of soaking up the bliss of 10 whole days away with my new husband.

I questioned everything: my dress (too big), my hair (too stiff), my bridesmaids (too many!)... even the fonts we'd used on our signage. And I berated myself for doing

“perfect” example. Every detail of the day is precisely chosen and tested; huge amounts of money are spent; the whole family is involved. All this creates extremely high expectations and the bride puts herself under a lot of stress trying to meet her own expectations and those of others.’ Crucially, says Diana, ‘if expectations are too high, failure is guaranteed.’

Mona Moussa, psychologist, author and personal development trainer at LifeWorks Dubai, agrees. ‘Post-bridal blues is especially common if the bride has a perfectionist outlook on her wedding, focusing her sole attention on the planning of it. Once the rush is over, the bride can feel lost, as if there’s a big void in her life, as if all excitement has been drained from her relationship and there’s nothing to look forward to.’

On reflection, this probably should have been obvious. But it never occurred to me that such a joyful, special event could trigger such a destructive emotional response. And in all my hours spent trawling the internet for inspiration, not once did I come across anything to suggest that the frosting on my big fat cake of a wedding would, or could, go sour.

In truth, I hadn’t exactly gone looking for it. If I had, I would have discovered that one in 10 newly married women suffer from post-bridal depression (PBD). And although it’s not yet recognised as a clinical condition, for those who experience it, it’s

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this when I should have been enjoying our honeymoon. No one seemed to get it, not even my wonderful, caring husband, which is fair enough because I didn’t get it either. We’d had the most incredible wedding day and now I was married to the love of my life.

Hard as I tried, though, I just couldn’t keep ahold of that perspective. My precious, happy memories of our wedding quickly became tinged with sadness and regret. My poor husband didn’t know what to do with me. I wouldn’t listen to reason because I had created a reason of my own: I should have done this or said that, and then it would all have been perfect.

THE TROUBLE WITH PERFECT

Ah yes, the P word. It’s got a lot to answer for, according to German Neuroscience Center psychologist Diana Nahas, who says, ‘Hundreds of books and movies show us the

every bit as real as, say, postnatal depression.

Alix, a writer colleague who got married in 2012, recalls, ‘It was a good few months before my PBD kicked in – as when we got back from honeymoon there were thank-you cards to write and friends to catch up with – but when it did, man, did I feel down. It was a kind of grief – I missed our wedding every single day. Everything had lost its sparkle. That special bride status had worn off and it was hard to readjust to post-wedding life.’

Another friend, Marie, says, ‘I treated my wedding as my little baby almost, so to go back to normal life felt so strange. There was no huge goal on the horizon anymore.’

It’s not uncommon for sufferers of PBD to liken it to postnatal depression. But when I suggest parallels between the two, Diana is quick to point out that ‘although some psychological factors may be similar,

postnatal depression is associated with the sudden decrease in reproductive hormones. This is definitely not the case with PBD’.

FACING THE VOID

Just as with other forms of depression, everyone’s experience of PBD is different. Mine was sudden and devastating but short-lived; for some, it’s more of a slow burn. And no one is immune. British soap star Michelle Keegan described returning from honeymoon after her wedding to TV presenter Mark Wright last year as ‘a huge blow’, admitting, ‘I had the blues for about three weeks afterwards.’

What is clear is that there are almost always other things at play. As Alix puts it: ‘A wedding is a wonderful thing, but it’s not real life. Planning my wedding gave me a focus, a form of escape, when I was really just putting off making big decisions about my career and kids.’

The act of organising such a major life event can be a welcome, elaborate diversion from what’s really going on. When I ran out of a wedding to plan, my instinct was to go back and deconstruct it, because by continuing to rake over all those minuscule details, I could avoid thinking about the greater fears. Namely, an imminent move to Dubai from the UK, leaving behind a job and friends I loved for an unknown life.

Once the wedding is over, all the issues you’ve been so busy avoiding shoot back up to the surface – only this time they seem

bigger and more threatening because you’re in a position of relative weakness. ‘Most brides feel a bit down or exhausted after their wedding, like you would after a big exam,’ says Diana. ‘They have the feeling of falling into a gap as they didn’t really plan what comes after the wedding day, and they feel empty and insecure.’

For me, being a bride tapped into decades-old insecurities about the way I look, as well as a tendency towards control freakery. I lost nine stone (about 57kg) to get into my dream dress, but because my goal was to lose 10 stone, I felt I’d let myself down – even though the dress ended up being too big for me (cue more self-flagellation).

Such insecurities aren’t helped, of course, by our growing obsession with social media – a compulsion to compose, filter and publicly construct our best selves that



has become the norm for many of us. And, as Mona points out, today's brides face a whole new dimension of isolation and loneliness 'once all the social media activity around the wedding has died down'.

On the flip side, our increasing need for connection, however superficial, means we have access to a huge support network. Chances are you were part of a community as a bride-to-be – a group, forum or blog. It's likely, too, that all the other now-married members of that community are going through something similar. So reach out to them. It can help, says Mona, to 'recognise that feeling empty and void is a normal reaction shared by many brides. This shared reality can help you realise you're not the only one experiencing these feelings'.

FINDING A NEW NORMAL

There are plenty of practical things you can do to combat PBD, even before the wedding. The key, says Diana, is to try and

who you are so you become just a bride.' And after the wedding, Mona says communication with your partner is vital. 'Talk about your feelings, especially if he has a different reaction and perceives the end of the honeymoon period as the beginning of a new and exciting life together.'

Ultimately, as with all damaging behaviours, you have to learn to let go. 'Post-bridal blues can be exacerbated by a tendency to ruminate and remain stuck in the past,' says Mona. 'Instead, bring yourself back to the present to enjoy time with your partner as you embark on a new journey.'

Reassuringly, Diana tells me the majority of women she sees are able to overcome PBD without clinical intervention, and with the help of their partner. Just as she told me I would, I was able to move on from my initial feelings of anxiety to a much healthier place, without professional support. Small things helped, like carving out wedding-talk-free time with my husband and, conversely,

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manage your expectations. 'Are they realistic? Are you putting yourself under too much pressure? Be prepared for a down, and think about who can help you through it. Make plans for the weeks after the big day – plan the marriage, not just the wedding.'

Adds Mona: 'Rather than putting your life on hold to plan your wedding, keep up your routine of work and socialising, along with fitness and leisure. Try to stay true to your sense of identity in its whole rather than allowing the wedding planning to take over

looking over our photos from the day. At first I found myself scouring each image for evidence of things that had been wrong, but over time I stopped trying to find fault and started noticing how happy I and everyone around me looked.

That vision of my perfect day had existed for such a long time in my head, it was hard to pack it away and embrace what had actually happened. But as I awoke to another sunny Dubai day as a wife, not just a bride, I'm reminded real is better than perfect.

'Post-bridal depression changed my life'



Lordine Huggins, 27, from London, became so depressed after her wedding, she quit her job and set up her own bridal blog

Lordine was a consultant before her big country-house wedding in 2014. She recalls, 'I thought I'd be happy once everything was over, but instead I hit a massive slump because there was nothing left to plan or experience. I thought the feeling of happiness would be so overwhelming that I wouldn't miss planning the wedding – after all, the end goal is the marriage and not the day.'

'It was four or five days into our honeymoon that the PBD hit me. It felt unsettling, like something was missing. I became fixated on every detail, such as the venue forgetting to turn on my fairy lights and my make-up artist letting me down. We were so late that my grandma, who had recently suffered a stroke, had to leave before the ceremony started. I'll never get over that. I kept thinking, how could this have been avoided? I developed such anger towards the make-up artist and it used to play on my mind all the time. My husband thought I was crazy.'

Lordine found it hard to accept that, despite all her best efforts, there were aspects of her wedding day she simply couldn't control. 'I think the main reason for my PBD was the regret I felt over my grandma missing the day. I felt I hadn't planned or delegated well enough and that was why this had happened.'

Things changed when Lordine returned from honeymoon to her high-pressure job. 'I realised how busy I was doing things I didn't feel passionate about, so I moved jobs and started my own bridal blog, showthebride.com. I decided I wanted to be involved in wedding planning on a professional level and really threw myself into my blog. Now, I love helping others on what remains a very special journey.'