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“Find strength from pain”

Jessica Hepburn, on realising she will never have a biological child

It's hard to explain the pain of losing something you never had. But, after 11 rounds of IVF, multiple miscarriages and a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy, I have had to come to terms with the fact that I will never have a biological baby.

It's a hole in my life that society sometimes finds difficult to understand. It's not as if the world needs any more people. And, of course, there's always adoption. But, for 10 years, the sadness and shame of not being able to create a child with the man that I love devastated me. I felt outcast from all the women around me who were mothers, as if I was on the outside of the most colourful sweet shop, and all I could do was knock on the glass and peer in.

I can't remember the day when

I started writing about it. Putting words on a page was cathartic, but the decision to publish my book changed everything. I was shocked by the number of people who wrote to me and said that I had put into words exactly how they felt. Infertility is a silent epidemic, an invisible thread of pain.

The book brought me blinking into the limelight as a 'public infertile' – a label that years earlier would have made me feel physically sick. But there was something about saying who I really was, and what I had been through, that became extraordinarily empowering. I decided I wanted to do something else: to raise awareness and money for charities supporting families living without the children they long for; and children in care without the families they deserve. I wanted to highlight what it felt

like to be a person battling with infertility, and decided to train to undertake one of the toughest physical and mental challenges in the world: swimming the Channel. Just like IVF, I was statistically more likely to fail than succeed.

I got into the sea in Dover in the middle of the night. Seventeen hours and 44 minutes later, my feet touched France. It was like giving birth. I laboured against tides, jellyfish and the cold, but then felt the most exhilarating euphoria that eclipsed the pain. I finally got my happy ending, although it wasn't the one that I'd expected. I may not be a mother but I am a Channel swimmer.

Infertility has taught me that life doesn't always work out how you wanted. Like the scar of my ectopic pregnancy, it will always be with me. But you have to find strength from pain – and, when you do, amazing things can happen.

Jessica Hepburn is the author of 'The Pursuit Of Motherhood' (Matador, £8.99)

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Lisa died in January 2011 when she was 44. We'd been together for 21 years. In reality, the loss started in hospital three years earlier when the consultant diagnosed her brain tumour. We were pinned in our seats, powerlessly watching a juggernaut sliding towards us. I went into cope-mode, numb and efficient, putting Lisa and Georgie before everything else.

I was 39, fit, with a successful career, nice cars, house and suits and, in my macho simplicity, I thought needing help was a weakness. I changed. I had to: I couldn't manage solo. I learned to accept dinners, lifts, babysitting. For three years during the surgery, chemo and radiotherapy, practical kindness kept me going. One friend kept inviting me to the cinema to watch action movies. He never tried to impart 'wisdom', just popcorn. My business partners afforded me total freedom – I asked them to take me off the payroll because of my absence, but they refused. This felt as much moral support as it did financial.

Shortly after Lisa died, I visited friends for Sunday lunch. They bickered viciously about the gravy. I felt invisible and was shocked at their carelessness. I stood silently in the kitchen, thinking: 'Just stop, you've got each other.' It struck me then that the everyday irritations in relationships are nonsense: they feel so much more important than they deserve, than

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