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Caitlin



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I woke up the day of my first child's well visit appointment and I felt absolutely awful. I was 5 days postpartum and trying to get myself out of the house but the exhaustion to even get sweatpants on was unreal. Every pothole we hit on the drive in, because it was mud season in Vermont, was a painful reminder that something did not feel right, even though I had just dealt with a postpartum hemorrhage a few days earlier. We entered a new primary care with a pediatrician I had never met before. I was so nervous because I didn't want to be the mom that complained and made things about "her". This appointment was supposed to be for him. So I rehearsed some words in my head that "maybe I could mention casually". Because maybe this was normal. Maybe I was "overreacting" but deep down I knew something was very wrong. I just wasn't sure if anyone would listen.

I was afraid they would wave it away as "just postpartum". What I wanted wasn't complicated. I wanted to be taken seriously. I wanted someone to hear me, really hear me, and trust that I knew my own body. I wanted to feel like I mattered too – not just the baby in the carrier.

Navigating the hospital system was fairly new to me and I had heard the stories where women are brushed off, told their symptoms were "normal", and then sent home when something was actually wrong. Those stories had stayed with me and in this moment absolutely terrified me. Because this wasn't just about me anymore. If I wasn't okay, how was I supposed to take care of him?

At the start of my stay everything felt like it was working against me. It was March 2020, right at the beginning of COVID, and the hospital was still figuring out its policies. Nothing felt clear cut or steady. When they decided to admit me, I was told they could treat me – but they couldn't care for the baby. There was even a time where it was uncertain if my partner could stay.

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I felt like I couldn't fully surrender to being treated because I still had to hold it together for my son. I couldn't be patient or mother. I still had to be both.

I can still remember how itchy the face mask felt as I was trying to get comfortable in my hospital bed to nurse my baby as I waited for my COVID test to come back. A test that I knew in my heart would be negative. My body was telling me this was something else.

And still, I felt like I had to prove why I was here. My body ached from the cervical checks. I was so weak and out of it that even walking to the bathroom felt like a marathon. At that moment advocating for myself felt impossible when I could barely keep my eyes open.

By this point in my visit, I was already in so much pain. My body felt bruised and raw from labor, from the hemorrhage, from what felt like endless cervical checks. When they told me they needed to do more internal exams – to look for retained placenta, to run more ultrasounds – I felt my whole body tense. I didn't think I could handle anyone touching me again. They offered nitrous oxide for the pain, and I remember thinking, I have nothing left.

I was drained...Physically. Emotionally. Mentally.

But something shifted too. I was no longer being dismissed anymore. I had a team of midwives and nurses around me, explaining things, checking in, treating me like I mattered. For the first time, I no longer felt like I had to convince anyone that something was wrong. So I stopped trying to be so strong and hold it all together. I just let myself be the patient. For the first time since giving birth, I let someone truly take care of me.

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Once we had answers on my diagnosis of an infection in my uterus everything moved quickly. I got IV antibiotics, fluids, and rest. Within two days the fogginess lifted, and I started to feel a little bit more like myself again. I stopped bracing for something to be wrong, and it made me realize how much energy I had spent trying to be low-maintenance – even when my body was asking for help.

I ended up with a positive outcome and my infection healed but what I really learned about using my voice was that it's not just choosing to speak up and advocate. It was about learning to not lean into fear and listen to myself again.

And so often as women in the healthcare system we do have to speak up and continually advocate for ourselves so when you know deep down that something is wrong and you are not getting what you think you should get – keep going — keep asking for help.

