

BY LUCY LAING.

My newborn baby was handed to me and as I gazed down at him, I just felt emptiness.

There was no massive wave of love sweeping over me as I'd expected it too.

My hubby Robert, 35, and I had been thrilled when I had fallen pregnant. We'd got married a few years before after meeting at a call centre where we both worked.

When I fell pregnant we were both over the moon, but then when our son Ryan actually arrived, it felt so different from what I was expecting.

I had heard other mothers who have this massive bond and rush of love for their newborn babies as soon as they arrived into the world. But not me. I just felt empty of feeling.

As the months went by, I still never got that feeling. I cared for Ryan, went through the motions of changing his nappy and feeding him. But I never felt anything for him. I'd see other mothers cooing over their babies, but not me. I was just going through the motions. I felt angry and frustrated most of the time and Robert would tell me I was a bit manic, constantly talking and edgy.

It was a huge strain on our relationship too. He felt as though he was walking on eggshells around me - never sure of when I was going to snap at him. But he stuck by me through it all, always supporting me. It was hard for him to cope with, but he always told me that he would love me no matter what.

But I knew that it wasn't right, how I felt about Ryan, and I wanted to do something about it, to make it better. Every mother should love her baby, and I really wanted to feel like that. So I went back and forth from the doctors over the next few years. I'd tell them how I was feeling, insisting that something was wrong with me. They would say that it was just exhaustion from being a new mum and that it would get better.

Eventually I got given anti depressants, and the cloud started to lift from me. It had taken three years, but finally I was getting some feelings for Ryan. It actually started to feel like I loved my son.

I spoke to a meningitis support group too, about how I was feeling. I'd had meningitis when I was three years old and my parents Marian and Dave had been frantic with worry about me.

I had been in a coma for two weeks, struggling to survive, but eventually I had made it through. Back then, not much was known about the long term effects of the meningitis.

But as I explained how I was feeling - my anger, my manic behaviour, and the fact that I couldn't love my son for the first precious few years of his life - the charity told me that it was all because of the brain injury that I'd suffered all those years ago with meningitis. Finally I felt as though what I had been feeling was being explained. It all made sense suddenly.

They explained to me that meningitis can leave you with brain damage afterwards that can make it hard to form relationships, with mood swings and irrational behaviour. So what I had been feeling towards my son had been as a result of my illness, not because of me being a bad mum. It was such a relief to hear. It was hard to come to terms with, but a relief to have an answer.

The charity told me that communication problems after a brain injury are very common. It explained all the difficulties I'd had growing up - I'd always known that I was different, and I had really struggled at school, both with learning and with making friendships too. I had a bad memory which made learning facts and figures difficult.

So it was my meningitis that I'd suffered as a toddler that was causing me not to love my son. The pregnancy had triggered an almost psychotic type of behaviour, that was leading to my depression, manic talking and inability to love.

After that I got lots of support from the charity and it really helped me start to build a proper relationship with Ryan.

Things are a lot better now. I've been able to get proper help and support, and Robert has been a wonderful support too. He's been through so much and had to cope with me on an emotional rollercoaster for three years. But we have come through it together, and our relationship is stronger for it.

We would like to have another baby in the future, and give Ryan a little brother or sister. And this time, I'll be fully prepared for it all. And I know that this time it will be different for me. I'm making up for lost time with Ryan. We do lots of things together, and we have such a strong bond together now. I finally feel as though I'm a proper loving mother to him. I do feel guilty for the three years that I didn't love him, but I'm making it up to him now.

I want people to realise just what meningitis can do - even years after recovery. It robbed me of three years of loving my son. If people have suffered meningitis then they need to understand that it can affect them for the rest of their life, and if it does, to seek help. I'm lucky in that I have been given so much support from them, and it has helped me be a better mum to my son.

Emma Baldwin, 36, from Oldham.

For more information about the symptoms of meningitis visit www.meningitisnow.org (please leave in)