



My Breastfeeding Journey

Recently, I read an article written by a Caucasian residing in Mongolia. She described with much jest about how the Mongolians traditionally breastfeed their children till six years of age as it makes them good wrestlers! Well, though I do not have such lofty aspirations to keep going for that long, I must say I am pretty happy with my progress report thus far.

When my first born came into this world, I, the starry-eyed first-time mother was won over immediately by her sweet innocent face, gentle coos and peaches-and-cream fragrance. I knew I wanted to provide my daughter with the best of everything that I could, and that exclusive breastfeeding was the only way I would go forth. Armed with the confidence of having read the breastfeeding chapters of at least three books in the market, I thought it would all be a romantic bed of roses, that my baby and I would click like clockwork at the word "go!"

But little did I know, and unfortunately no one had ever thought to disappoint me, I slowly discovered in the days that passed, that exclusive breastfeeding was no walk in the park. In fact, it was a lot of tears, sweat and literally, blood. But thinking back, it was all worth it, and I am so glad that I managed to grit my teeth through the tough times, as the rewards that followed were so much more beautiful in comparison to the difficulties.

Five minutes after my daughter was born, the labour ward sister placed her beside me and helped her latch. "This will stimulate your supply," she said lovingly. "Oh, you have inverted nipples," she observed. "Oh I see," I thought, "shouldn't be that great a deal." However, in the next few days, I came to realise that those inverted nipples were a great deal after all. My daughter could not latch properly as there was nothing for her to hold on to. Thus, the latch kept slipping and she could not get at the milk. In addition, she was awfully sleepy. When we finally got the correct latch after the umpteenth attempt, she suddenly decided to go into dreamland after a few suckles, and I had to wake her up and restart the cycle all over again.



To make things worse, both my mother and mother-in-law had never had the experience of breastfeeding. So when they saw the difficulty that I was facing, all the help they could offer was to urge me to turn to formula. It was quite a bother, to be frank, but I managed to soldier on and things gradually improved. In those first few days, I found in myself patience and determination that I had never known before.

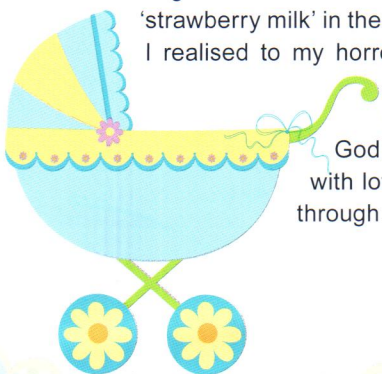
After we were discharged and at home, I felt I was all by myself with the helpless baby, both feeling just as clueless. However, remembering the words of the hospital's Lactation Consultant implored me to pump industriously in the initial days to stimulate my supply; I frantically tried to assemble my breast pump. I never knew it would be so difficult to put together a few bottles, funnels and tubes. But goodness, I had never seen these alien things before!

My mother, too, worried about my milk supply, endearingly prepared for me papaya fish soup day after day. We were all wondering if it was working, until I suddenly woke up in the middle of one night to chills and rigors, shaking violently and feeling very sick. I thought it must have been one of those confinement practices that I didn't adhere to, such as not to bathe within the first month. But after a consult with my friendly Lactation Consultant, I realised that the diagnosis was Engorgement. Yes, with a Capital E. Wow, is this how it happens? One day you wonder if you have enough milk, and the next, the milk all comes back with a vengeance as if telling me, 'how dare you doubted me?!'

So out came the cabbage leaves. Other than the cabbage leaves, I can't remember how I got over the engorgement. It must have been the brain's ability to blot out the most horrendous of all memories. I just remember thinking when I would stop feeling like I had two huge rocks plastered to the front of my chest. I finally understood the point of me strengthening my hand muscles during those countless hours at the piano when I was young. I massaged my breasts so hard till I was covered with bruises and my husband joked that I looked like I had been brutally assaulted or something.

In the first month, I never had more than 2 hours of continuous sleep at a stretch, since my dainty daughter would take one hour per feed, leaving me with at the most two hours before the next feed. I marveled that I had such strength. But this is the strength borne out of love and devotion that all women discover once they become mothers. It is almost inexplicable, almost inconceivable.

Over the next few months, I came to be acquainted with the full gamut of breastfeeding problems. Once there was 'strawberry milk' in the bottle that I had expressed out – I realised to my horror that my nipple was bleeding from a fissure. The pain was searing to the bone. Thank God it recovered within a few days with lots of lanolin and gritting of teeth through all the feeding sessions.



Another time, I was far away from home in Malaysia when Elise was four months old, feeling confident that I would ditch the pump during that trip and just exclusively latch. Lo and behold, I didn't realise that four months is the time when their appetites dip, and I came down with blocked ducts and a roaring fever with no panadol at my disposal. However, I am thankful that each time, the friendly Lactation Consultants at KKH were always more than ready to give a helping hand, be it in person or even through a long distance call across the seas! (there wasn't whatsapp then!)

Thinking back, all these were but minor bumps along the way. Each time I gaze down at the precious little face nursing serenely at my bosom, I am filled with awe and amazement at such a beautiful conception and arrangement by God. That how mothers are given the exclusive privilege to provide their own beloved children with something so wholesome, something that fulfills not just the physical need, but also the emotional. In the first 6 months of their existence, these babies essentially do not need anything else for survival except for their mothers' constant attention and affection by their side. Just by the sheer fact that these newborns take their own sweet time to nurse without a care in the world, it ensures that the emotional bond between mother and child is so very naturally nurtured during these treasured nursing sessions. The babies are so sensitive and they recognise their mothers by the unique smell of the mother's milk, and just by a whiff of that scent, the babies are immediately calmed and secured. And the list goes on.

During the one year of exclusive breastfeeding, I witnessed how my breastmilk had made her so strong, both physically and emotionally. Within the first week of withdrawing all breastmilk, Elise fell sick for the first time in her life. I was convinced that the immune benefits of breastmilk are not overrated. And she is self-assured, confident of herself, perhaps due to all the time that I was compelled to spend with her while nursing.

Now, with my second born, he is a strong young man at 17 months, almost a wrestler in the making, and still clamouring for that maternal source of comfort whenever he decides that he needs it. I am glad that I have lasted this long, much thanks to a very supportive work environment and fellow colleagues in this similar stage of our lives, cheering each other on. In fact, I hesitate to think that this season of my life might be almost over; I can't help but feel a tinge of longing and nostalgia, much like how cotton candy and popcorn during childhood sleepovers bring a smile and warmth to my heart. And if you'll excuse me, the boy is awake and demanding that these boobs be at his disposal now!

This article is dedicated to my fellow Jasmine girls – Ms Liu and Ms Sim, without whom I would not have sojourned thus far.

Freda is a happy mother to her two adorable children, aged 4 and 1. Apart from being a hands-on mother, she takes a keen interest in women's health issues, as well as in the beauty of arts. She tries her utmost best to juggle her commitments of work and family, and though busy, finds joy in counting her innumerable blessings at the end of each day.