

Brooke with her daughter Rowan at nearly a year old

'Behind the smile, I was falling apart'

Brooke Shields couldn't wait to be a mum, but after the birth of her daughter Rowan, she sank into despair

Words Siobhan Grogan

When I first meet Brooke Shields she looks every bit the Hollywood star. It's a look that's demanded of her for the interviews she's giving to launch her stint in the West-End show *Chicago*.

But keeping up appearances is the last thing on Brooke's mind these days. In a world where celebrities recover their post-baby bodies in five weeks and make new parenthood seem as effortless as getting a facial, Brooke's reality of becoming a mother couldn't have been less glossy.

In a new book she painfully describes the postnatal depression she experienced after the birth of her daughter Rowan, two years ago. She describes the dread she felt holding her new baby, and being gripped by self-loathing. She was left with an urge to 'smash my head against the wall' and describes how she'd find herself sobbing day and night as she battled to understand the confusing feelings that overwhelmed her.

'At first, I thought it was exhaustion, but with it came a sense of panic,' Brooke says softly. 'If I could have taken showers 24/7 I would have. I just stood there and cried. I

thought, "This is never going to end; I'm never going to get better. I should never have done this. What was I thinking?"'

After a lifetime of success, a baby was supposed to be the icing on the cake for Brooke and her second husband, screenwriter Chris Henchy, who she married in April 2001. She had desperately wanted children during her two-year marriage to tennis star Andre Agassi, but their busy careers meant the time was never right and the couple eventually divorced.

The desire to become a mother only intensified as Brooke struggled to get pregnant by Chris. She began IVF treatment, after repeated operations to remove pre-cancerous cells left her with a scarred cervix at 36, and suffered a miscarriage, eventually becoming pregnant after more than two years trying.

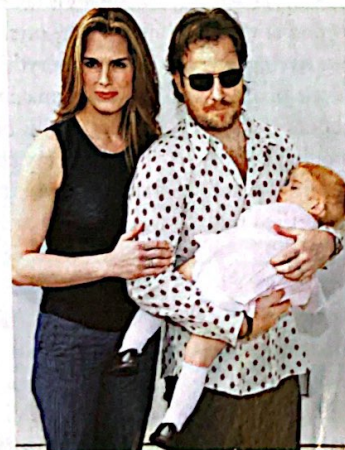
'I had the best pregnancy,' Brooke remembers. 'And I thought that the minute she arrived everything

would come into focus.' The reality, however, was a lot less appealing. 'I was setting myself up for a disappointment. I had put too much pressure on myself to be a perfect mother.'

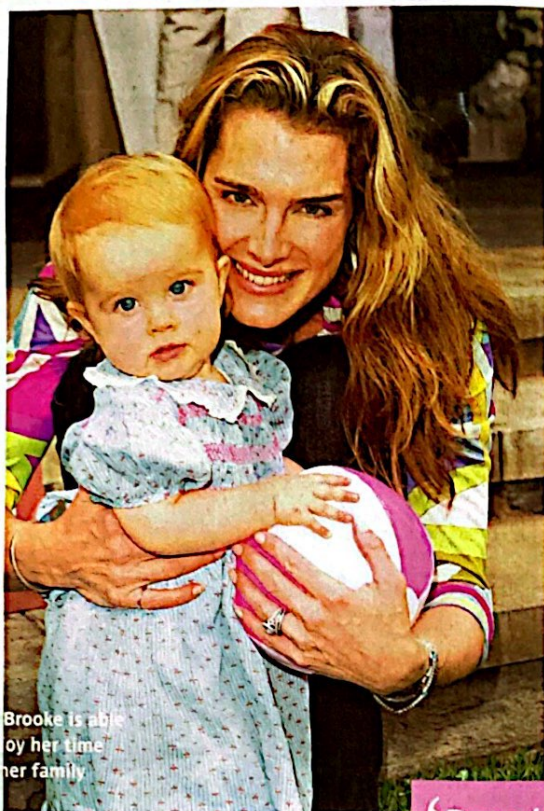
She smiles with the bittersweet benefit of hindsight. Though desperate for a 'normal' birth, she endured a traumatic emergency Caesarean, which left her in shock. While friends, family and her husband celebrated Rowan's birth, Brooke felt anything but joyful. 'None of it made sense. I'd just got what I wanted,' she exclaims. 'After all I'd been through I

should have been rejoicing but I couldn't.' Moments alone with Rowan were the worst as Brooke struggled to breast-feed, desperate for someone to come into the room and take her. 'I felt awkward and incompetent,' she says.

As a lifelong over-achiever – she'd made her catwalk debut at three; appeared in the classics *The Blue* —



With her husband, screenwriter Chris Henchy, and Rowan in March this year



Brooke is able to enjoy her time with her family

Lagoon and *Endless Love* as a teenager; been named the face of the 1980s by *Time* magazine in her twenties; and graduated from Princeton University – Brooke was used to being in control and on top of her game. She had faced hurdles like her divorce, IVF treatment and her father's death just three weeks before Rowan's birth without a fuss. The despair she felt after her daughter arrived was utterly alien.

'Depression was something for weak people,' she shrugs. 'When it was suggested to me, I scoffed. It never occurred to me that it was postnatal depression, though really, I was a classic case. I think I had been so good at keeping my defences up, but having a baby had suddenly stripped me of all strength. Everything that should have affected me before came flooding back. But to me, I was grieving for my life and the new lack of control just derailed me.'

Refusing to hire a nanny, Brooke relied on family to help out as Chris returned to work in LA. She now describes those days as blurring into 'one tortuous day where routine and time were suddenly taken away.' The iconic beauty who had once fronted a high-

profile Calvin Klein campaign, barely had the energy to leave her home.

'The odd thing was when I was out, people assumed I was happy because I always had Rowan with me. But I needed her with me because if she wasn't, I may have tried to slip away.'

Brooke is the first to admit her recovery was slow and difficult. At rock bottom and supported by friends and her husband, she finally agreed to take medication, hire a baby nurse and see a therapist. 'I've never taken a pill for anything. It doesn't seem natural to me but I do believe that's the thing that helped me,' she insists. 'Gonal-F balanced out my body chemistry. I think in moderation and with guidance, it is fine.'

Returning to work was another challenge the actress had to face. With six-month-old Rowan still breast-feeding, Brooke began shooting a mini-series called *Gone But Not Forgotten* on location.

'At first I loved it but then I became so uninterested,' she says. 'My priorities changed.' Gradually, she began to cherish simple moments with her daughter: 'Like this morning she woke up and said, "Mama, cosy,"' Brooke says, 'and she put her hand on my face and I thought, "That's what they're talking about!" But it takes a while. Now every time I'm away from her, I can't wait to be around her.'

Postnatal depression has left its mark on Brooke. She also acknowledges the effect it has had on her husband. 'If I'm having a bad day, he'll be worrying that it's happening again. It has made him a little less trusting of my capacity to handle things. I get insulted, but I have to remember it's been hard for him, too.'

'This is definitely the happiest I've ever been,' she says.

'I have everything I've ever imagined in my family, my husband, my child and my work. I am so lucky.'

Brooke Shields' book, *Down Came The Rain* (Michael Joseph, £12.99), is out on May 26th. She stars in *Chicago* at London's Adelphi Theatre until June 25th



Are you suffering from postnatal depression?

- Half of women who give birth feel down a few days after having a baby, but The Royal College of Psychiatrists estimates that one in 10 women now goes on to suffer actual postnatal depression. If untreated, it can last for months, or even longer.
- 'Feeling very tired, loss of appetite, having poor concentration and bad sleep can all just be symptoms of being a new mum, but it's important to watch for someone who feels very low in mood or is constantly tearful,' explains Dr Jim Bolton, consultant psychiatrist at St Heliers Hospital, South London. Another sign is when the mother dreads being left alone with her baby and feels a loss of control in her life. Dr Bolton says: 'Very severe postnatal depression is when mothers feel like life is getting on top of them and it may not be worth going on.'

Treatments

COUNSELLING Useful to share problems, look at solutions and recognise stresses and strains outside of childbirth.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS Women are often worried that medication is incompatible with breast-feeding, but actually there are still some antidepressants you can take.

SOCIAL SUPPORT Some mums may feel quite isolated and it's often useful – though perhaps tough – to reach out to other people or find a support group. Talking does help.

How best to find help

- Talk to your GP or health visitor who are now using a well-tested screening questionnaire that helps spot symptoms of postnatal depression and allows mums to talk about the emotional side of parenthood as well as the practical aspects.
- For more information on postnatal depression, call the Association for Post Natal Illness on (020) 7386 0868; or go to rpsych.ac.uk.