



When Amy saw Yasmine, the connection was instant



THE BEST FRIENDS

we had never met... until now



Shelley and Sam share a heart-breaking bond



These readers forged a special relationship online, but it wasn't until *Prima* brought them together that they actually came face to face ➔

‘We could be totally honest’

Amy Armstrong, 33, from Spennymoor, County Durham, and Yasmine Dunn, 30, from Newcastle upon Tyne, connected as they struggled with their pregnancies.



Lying in a hospital bed, attached to a drip, wracked with sickness and desperately worried about my unborn baby, I posted a message on an online forum: “I don’t know how much more of this I can cope with.” Straight away, as I knew she would, a woman called Yasmine messaged back. We’d never met but she’d become the friend I turned to when things got really tough.

I was four weeks pregnant with my first baby when I started being sick, and by the time I was eight weeks in I was vomiting up to 80 times a day. I could barely eat a thing, even watching TV made me feel ill. I spent most of my time clutching a bowl. Only on good days was I able to drag myself to work, as a team leader at a pharmaceutical company. I became so weak I ended up in A&E, and was finally diagnosed with hyperemesis gravidarum (HG), extreme pregnancy sickness.

FINDING SUPPORT

I was unlucky. Around 70% of women experience nausea or sickness during their pregnancy, but only 1% of them end up in hospital with it. At least I’m in good company – the Duchess of Cambridge also suffered with HG and had to be admitted to hospital. My husband Alexander was incredibly supportive but it was traumatic for him. He became more of a carer than a husband and I thought if I told him how wretched I really felt, I’d just be adding to his burden. When I discovered the forum on the Pregnancy Sickness Support (PSS) website, it was amazing. Talking to other women going through the same thing



meant I didn’t feel so alone, and Yasmine and I could be honest with one another.

At my lowest I couldn’t see a way out and even considered terminating my pregnancy. Our baby was very much wanted but I was so ill I thought I was going to die. I struggle to come to terms with that now. I still feel guilty. Once I got support through PSS and told Yasmine how I was feeling, it gave me strength to go on.



Amy and her daughter, Luna

When I worried that I was going to lose the baby or myself, she kept me going. “We’ll beat this,” she’d type.

Only after I gave birth to Luna in May 2017, who was 6lb 6oz, and the sickness went, could I

message Yasmine and tell her that my baby was fine – and hers would be, too. Although we’d kept in touch, until *Prima* arranged for us to meet, we hadn’t even spoken on the phone. It was incredible to tell her face to face how her kindness and wisdom got me through. It was like meeting a good friend who I hadn’t seen for a while. It was one of the best days I’ve had in a long time. We are now planning our next meet up, this time with our daughters.’

Amy says meeting Yasmine was ‘one of the best days I’ve had in a long time’

‘She helped me see I didn’t have to struggle on alone’

Trainee psychologist Yasmine says:



Meeting Amy was about more than just giving her a huge hug to thank her for helping me through the toughest nine months of my life. It was part of the healing process, bringing to a close that difficult time that marked both our lives.

We were both nervous, but it was like meeting an old friend. As we talked, I remembered what a lifeline she had



‘We are planning to bring our little girls together to start another wonderful friendship’



Yasmine and her daughter, Sienna

been. It was the first time I’d spoken to someone in person about what we went through, who listened and understood.

Amy had been quick to respond when I joined the PSS forum. That day I’d been so sick, I’d burst the blood vessels around my eyes. I felt ill rather than pregnant, and said how low I felt. When Amy replied, it was the first time I felt understood.

A FRIEND TO LEAN ON

Amy urged me to go to my doctor. She told me about the medication she’d been prescribed, and helped me see that I didn’t have to struggle on alone.

Vomiting up to 20 times a day, I felt so wiped out that I could barely communicate with my husband, Michael. I could message Amy from my phone in

bed, although looking at the screen made me feel queasy sometimes. She was a light in the darkness. We were honest with each other, talking about the strain on our husbands and our fears for our unborn daughters. We were terrified that the babies weren’t getting enough nutrition and gave each other advice on which foods we might be able to keep down.

Amy’s HG was worse than mine, so I often felt as if nothing I could say would help. I just tried to offer emotional support on her bad days. The loneliness can be crushing, so I wanted to be someone for her to talk to so she wouldn’t feel alone.

Although my sickness subsided at 21 weeks, I felt nauseous throughout; even

the scent of shower gel or toothpaste could set me off, along with any smell of food. With a third

of my pregnancy to go, it was amazing to receive the news that Luna was fine, and that Amy’s sickness had gone. My daughter Sienna was born three months later, and I cried with relief when I was offered a cup of tea after the birth and didn’t want to be sick. I knew my nightmare was nearly over.

We’ve kept in touch on Instagram, and I feel a real connection with Amy and Luna. It’s a pleasure to witness their mother-daughter journey. Now we have met, we are planning to bring our little girls together to start another wonderful friendship.

• pregnancysicknesssupport.org.uk ➔

Photography: Claire Wood

‘Having the chance to say thank you was priceless’

Out of heartbreak, Shelley Jess, 41, from Chelmsford, and Sam Lowrie, 44, from Stevenage, have forged a very special friendship.



The tears started flowing the moment I saw Sam – I reached out and wrapped her in a hug. It felt natural, and we instantly

began chatting as if we’d known each other for years rather than months.

Since my husband, Dylan, 48, took his own life in April this year, life has often felt unbearable. The guilt, anger and loneliness is sometimes indescribable, so finding Sam through the Facebook page of a local group of Widowed & Young (WAY), and knowing that she had faced the same thing, literally changed my life.

Ten months earlier, Sam’s husband had also taken his life. My sons, Harvey, 12, and Robbie, eight, had been left without a father, and her young children had also experienced that loss. It was like we were meant to find each other. I knew she would understand – and she does. She knows what I am going through because she’s been through it, too.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Through my darkest times, Sam has been the person I’ve turned to. When the headstone went up on my husband’s grave, it floored me. Of all my wonderful friends and family, I knew that Sam would understand in a way that no one else could. She’d understand why I wanted to cry with grief and scream with anger, and she’d help me remember that it wouldn’t always hurt as much as it did right then.

Although we’d messaged each other frequently, we’d never even spoken on the phone, and meeting up was very emotional. Having the chance to say “thank you” was priceless. We laughed and cried together. If I hadn’t found Sam, I think things would be very different.

Dylan and I had met in a nightclub in London’s Leicester Square in 1996. We



‘Our friendship goes much deeper than tragedy. We just click’

Shelley (left) and Sam have helped ease each other’s pain



Shelley with Dylan and their children

Words: Mel Hunter Photography; Angela Spain Sam wears: Top, Debenhams. Jeans, Monsoon Shelley wears: Top, Debenhams. Trousers, H&M

got talking and never really stopped, getting married eight years later. To the outside world, Dylan was very chatty and charismatic and, although I knew there was a very anxious side to him, I’ll never really know why he left us.

As well as the pain of losing him, I’ve had to sort out the practicalities of life without him and that’s

included moving into a new house. It’s been a time of huge upheaval and loneliness and, with Sam’s support, I have spent the past few months trying to make sense of it all, to understand why it happened, and what the future can look like without Dylan here. Life can feel overwhelming at times, juggling work and the kids alone, but if I am having a bad day I can message her and tell her how I am feeling, day or night, knowing she will be there.

I can say anything to Sam and she understands my feelings – grief mixed with anger – because she has been through what I’ve been through and I take heart from seeing that she is doing okay. She is my light at the end of this dark tunnel, and hopefully she can see through my experience just how far she has come.’



‘It feels like we’ve been friends for ever’

Sam, who has a daughter, Daisy, 13, and a son, Archie, nine, says:



The moment I found the body of my husband, Richard, will stay with me for ever. He’d been out all day

with his old workmates, then came home and had a drink in the garden. I thought he’d had enough to drink, and told him so, but he stormed off. I never saw him alive again.

The days after his death in June 2017 were bleak. I thought my world had ended and in some ways, life as I knew it had. I was desperate to find someone who understood, and that’s when I found the WAY forum. I got some wonderful support from other people my age who had also lost their husbands, including one lady whose husband had also taken his own life.

It was more than six months before I got talking to Shelley that her own tragedy began, and she messaged me via the forum. I wanted to help from the start, knowing the grief we were feeling was different to someone who had lost a husband to cancer or heart disease. I knew, like me, she’d be angry and lonely, and wondering if she could have done anything differently and whether she should have spotted signs of what was going on. It was those kind of thoughts that still haunted me.

Richard had been made redundant from a job he loved nearly a year before and, at 51, he lost confidence that he’d find something else. After some knockbacks, he became really down and was on the waiting list for counselling. I could feel him drifting



away from me and nothing I said or did would get through to him.

REBUILDING TOGETHER

We’d been together nearly 20 years when he died and I was left to cope alone, to tell our children, plan his funeral, deal with the inquest, and try to rebuild a life without him. It felt unreal and still does in many ways.

At the start I hated Richard for doing this, for not being here to read the kids’ school reports or celebrate their achievements. However many times I told myself that his mental illness was just as real as any other illness, that anger is only starting to subside now.

I’ve been amazed by Shelley’s strength and determination to push through her agony and put her boys first. Helping Shelley is helping me and by talking about the agonising outcome of my husband’s mental illness, I hope I can help others too.

Every day I wake next to an empty space and have to start again, but we have moved forward; we function as a family, even without Richard.

Finding Shelley has been a wonderful thing to come out of all this pain. We may have first found each other through the tragedy we share, but our friendship goes much deeper than that. We just click. I may have only known her a few months, but when we met it felt like we had been friends for ever.’

• widowedandyoung.org.uk



Sam, Richard and their children