

Survivor Mums' Companion

by Julia Seng and Mickey Sperlich

with Sara Dunbar, Clare Law and Emma Lowrie



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To the survivor mums who helped
us build this—and to the ones who
will make use of it.



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FOREWORD

I am so pleased that Julia Seng and Mickey Sperlich invited the Sidran Traumatic Stress Institute to partner with them on *Survivor Mums' Companion*. Since 1989, Sidran has worked with trauma survivors to develop and publish articles, workbooks and “how-to’s” for general readers. We have also produced training materials for frontline providers and clinical materials for therapists and counsellors on posttraumatic stress and dissociation topics.

According to the National Center for PTSD (www.ncptsd.org), “A little more than half of all women will experience at least one traumatic event in their life. The most common trauma for women is sexual assault or child sexual abuse. About one in three women will experience a sexual assault. Women are also more likely to be neglected or abused in childhood, to experience domestic violence, or to have a loved one suddenly die.”

Over the years, Sidran has worked with female survivors who have made (or been forced into) less than ideal choices regarding parenthood. Many opted out completely, fearing they could never be “good enough” mums. Others gave birth and struggled daily through the experience. These women received little or no guidance specific to their trauma histories. Still others gave their babies up for adoption, hoping adoptive parents could give them a better, more stable life. Most tragically, many tried but were unable to keep their children safe, and lost them to child welfare services systems instead.

With the high rate of posttraumatic stress—often unrecognised—among women of childbearing age, I was very interested in Seng and Sperlich’s groundbreaking research and their subsequent book, *Survivor Mums* (Motherbaby Press, 2008). I asked them to contact me if they ever decided to use that scholarly material to address the practical needs of pregnant women with trauma histories.

They did. And with that, *Survivor Mums' Companion* (*SMC*) was born.

SMC is an inherently relational programme. That’s because trauma perpetrated in a relationship is best healed in a relationship. The programme is modelled on the relationship between a tutor and student.



This approach softens the power dynamics typical of medical care. It also helps participants practise and strengthen connections with responsive and supportive peers.

We are very excited that the *SMC* is now a reality. We hope that this evidence-based intervention—the **only** intervention specifically developed for use during the perinatal year—empowers the long-neglected population of survivor mums. We also hope that it will help them make better choices, strengthen their connections with others, embark on a lifetime of satisfying motherhood and nurture a generation of safe and happy children.

Esther Giller, President

Sidran Traumatic Stress Institute



PREFACE

As midwives, we know that pregnancy is a pivotal time. We wanted to create a resource that would reflect survivor mums' experiences and what their experiences taught us. Survivor mums showed us how they could use information and skills to transform the challenges of trauma into assets that support their efforts to become strong, protective mothers. These mums also stated how important it was to know that they were not the only ones coping with trauma. They wanted good help from their maternity care team.

As researchers, we also know that trauma can be passed from one generation to the next. But it need not be. Mums who have a chance to begin their healing before they begin their parenting are optimistic about raising their child in safety and with a strong bond.

We hope the *SMC* is useful to you. Know that you are not alone. We send you our best wishes.

Mickey Sperlich and Julia Seng

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NSPCC



A WORD OF EXPLANATION ABOUT LANGUAGE

The Survivor Mums' Companion (SMC) was first written by two midwives from the United States. Soon we were working with health and mental health professionals from Australia, England and other countries. We want women in many places to be able to use the *SMC*. So we decided to use words and talk about health systems in very broad, basic terms so the book could work for lots of women.

We know that doctors, nurses, health visitors, and others are involved in prenatal care in some places. But in most of the world, midwives care for pregnant women. That's why we have chosen to use the word midwife. If that doesn't fit your situation, that's fine. Just think of your own health care provider when we use the term. No matter what profession she or he represents.

In some places, pre- or post-natal care takes place in clinics. But not everywhere. In some places, home birth is common. In other places, women usually give birth in hospitals. We've tried to use very general terms like "during your visits with the midwife" or "when you are in labour." We hope that when you read these words, you can keep your caregiver and the care location in mind.

Terms used to describe mental health systems and mental health staff also vary. We use the term "counsellor" to describe someone who talks with people seeking care. The term "doctor" describes someone who may also prescribe medication.

In many places in the book, we tell you that there are people or resources available to help you. We could list them, but they vary from location to location. We think that it makes more sense to ask your tutor or midwife about the resources in your own area. We hope you will come to like and trust your tutor and midwife. Once you do, you'll probably feel able to ask them to connect you to resources.

One of the main reasons we've developed the *SMC* programme is to let you know that you're not alone. One in five women has endured childhood abuse or neglect. That's why we've used general terms to describe health care systems. We hope that by doing so, you'll remember that you have companions on this journey—everywhere.



Disclaimer

The Survivor Mums' Companion as a Resource

The Survivor Mums' Companion (SMC) is a psychoeducation programme. It was designed to be a learning and skills practise resource for managing posttraumatic stress and other reactions that can affect pregnant and postpartum women with a history of childhood maltreatment.

It was also created to develop and nurture emotional support for this learning process. That's why a qualified tutor is key to the success of this programme. The trauma that pregnant women have experienced *happened* in a relationship. Therefore, in our view, they deserve for it to also *heal* in a relationship.

So, if you are a survivor mum, we urge you to take this advice: Please don't go it alone. Work with an *SMC* tutor and enjoy the support you deserve.

The *SMC* is not intended to substitute for relationships with health care providers or for treatment(s) tailored to individual needs. This workbook is intended to provide information that will make it easier to seek out the treatment you may need. But it is not a substitute for consulting qualified maternity care and mental health professionals for recommendations specific to your situation.

