

An illustration of a pregnant woman with red hair in a braid, wearing a dark green t-shirt. She is gesturing with her right hand. A speech bubble above her head contains the text "I want to feel strong." data-bbox="456 121 597 164"/>

I want to feel strong.

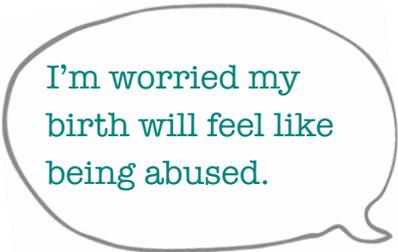
MODULE 6

Preparing For Labour and Birth

Goals Of Module 6

- ✓ Think through any trauma-related worries about labour
- ✓ Plan for managing any triggers you expect
- ✓ Plan how to deal with any too-strong feelings that might come up
- ✓ Practise interpretation skills. Or plan to put interpreting “on hold” until after the birth





I'm worried my birth will feel like being abused.



I want to feel cared for myself. I'm not ready to be a mum.

Giving Birth

For body, mind, and spirit, giving birth is a big deal for most women. There are lots of classes and books that can help women prepare for birth and labour. This module will help with the extra work that childhood abuse survivors might need to do to get ready. And don't forget to look at the supplement located at the end of this module! It contains lots of things you can do to make labour easier.

Will Giving Birth Be Traumatic?

Just like everyone else, survivors have a wide range of birth experiences. Some experiences are great and some are difficult. After the birth, some women feel strong and happy in a way they've never felt before. Others feel happy but are glad to be on the other side of it. It's important to know that most survivors say their birth was good. Still, some feel like the birth itself was a traumatic experience.

Survivors are more likely than other women to say that their birth felt traumatic. But usually that isn't because there was a medical emergency. Women—not just survivors—who said their birth was traumatic often thought the staff wasn't caring or skilled. They also felt staff members weren't open enough when they were talking about what was going on.

There's nothing you can do to stop a medical emergency. But there are things you can do to avoid feeling confused or hurt by the people



that help you during labour and delivery. This is why we will talk now about preparing for three things:

1. Feeling a lack of control—of staff and of labour itself
2. Feeling protected
3. Managing triggers

What About Feeling Lack of Control Over Staff?

Giving birth in the hospital might remind you of what you felt like as a child. You might feel like you have no control over what happens to you. The doctors, nurses and midwives have all of the experience and most of the power. You have no choice but to depend on them. You will not be able to control their behaviour. It feels like they're the ones in charge.

Some women want to give birth at home so they have more control over what happens. But you might not have this choice. Or it might not feel safest to you. No matter where you start out in labour, if there is an emergency, you might have to go in to a hospital. Either way you should try to be ready to **not** be in charge and **not** be in control.



Most mums find that their care is very close to what they wanted and planned. But sometimes this doesn't happen. Maybe you didn't want an IV and wanted to be able to walk around. But the midwife preferred that you stay in bed hooked up to the monitor. You might be able to ask



for what you want, but you still may or may not get it. Prepare for the “real” over the “ideal” and expect to be a bit flexible. You’ll still be okay even if things aren’t happening exactly the way you hoped.



How important is feeling in control to you?

- Try thinking of a situation where you weren’t in control that was okay. What made it okay?

- Have you started thinking about your labour? Do you have any thoughts about what you really want to feel in control about during that time? Things that have to do with how staff work with you?

Can You Feel Protected?

One way to feel safe and ready for the “real” thing is to find someone who can come with you to the hospital. Women often feel better if they bring a friend along to look out for them. Someone who’s supporting and protecting them. You might call this person “my birth support person” or “my protector.” This person will listen to what’s going on. She’ll tell the midwife what you want and need, even if you can’t. Your birth support person can sit with you during and after the birth. She can also talk it all through with you when you feel ready. This friend can promise to stay by your side the whole time. That’s a promise your midwife won’t be able to make.

This person may or may not be your partner, who could be too emotional. You may want to choose someone who knows you really well. Try to pick someone who’s been around people giving birth before. You could even pick someone who’s given birth herself. That way she’ll



understand and focus on what you need most. She can even come with you to midwife appointments before the birth. It helps if this person knows about your trauma-related worries.

You might find that having help from someone you know, trust and are at ease with will make your birth experience happier. Trauma survivors may feel the benefit of this support even more than other mums. Having someone to take care of you during birth can lower your stress. Your support person can take the pressure off the baby's dad too. Especially if it's his first time being around a birth. There may be less stress if you're both supported by a third person. Someone who isn't your partner. Then they'll be less stress on everyone.



Who do you think might be able to look out for you while you are giving birth?

- Could your partner be the person you need to do this? Might someone else be better?

Talk to your tutor about this if you need some ideas about who can help.



What About Managing Triggers?

Survivor mums often worry about triggers that could cause a PTSD reaction during labour. You might worry that the pain of giving birth or being examined might remind you of a past traumatic event. If you know this might happen, you can plan for it. You can practise some ways to avoid or be ready for PTSD triggers.



In the middle of labour, your options for how to “get off on a quiet side street” will be limited! One thing that may help is to quickly compare two events. Compare what happened when you were little (abuse) with what’s happening now (the birth of your baby). These are very different events. When you were young and all alone, sexual abuse was probably a very confusing secret. You were a child and the abuser took advantage of you. You had no say in anything. During your birth, you’ll have trusted people with you who’ll take care of you. The exams will be a normal part of the birth. Nothing will be kept a secret. Everyone in your life knows about this event. It shouldn’t be confusing, because you’ve made a plan. You’ll be told what’s happening at each stage of labour and delivery.

You may need to have some short thoughts ready to tell yourself in labour. Share these thoughts with others so they can share them with you if you need them to. You can say to yourself, “This is intense, but I am safe.” “I am giving birth!” “Look at all these people helping me.” “I can’t wait to see this baby.” There are lots of things to say to yourself that can help you feel grounded in the present. Grounded in what is really happening.



What do you think might be your trigger when you give birth?

- How will this be different from what you went through when you were little?

 - What things can you say to yourself that will help you feel grounded in the present and safe?
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But What if it Gets to Be **Too** Much?

Labour probably will seem like way too much to cope with at some point. It's a huge challenge to give birth. But it's possible to feel quite overwhelmed, **and** well cared for and safe at the same time. Those things **can** go together. And they can be completely normal. Staff who work with women in labour will be used to all kinds of physical experiences and intense emotional reactions. You don't need to worry about that.

But what if it feels like too much intensity for **you**? You can make use of your calming skills. Having a cup of tea or journaling... well, those are fine in the middle of the night, but they won't work in labour! You might want to plan some ideas that likely **will** work in labour.

Just saying what you feel to someone can help. Can you picture yourself saying, "That upset me. It triggered me. I need to re-group." Saying it can let your birth support person know that you need support. Your support person can hear you and say something helpful like, "I'm so sorry that triggered you. I'm here with you, and you are safe." Or she might say to you, "Maybe having a good cry would help you." Or, "How about letting me massage your back?" She might even tell the midwife you need some privacy for a few minutes. You can work out ideas that can calm and support you in advance, or just try what feels right in the situation.

Getting information about your progress can help you feel cared for and calm. So can updates on what's happening from time to time. Sometimes that's all it takes to help you cope as you make your way through the process of giving birth. You may choose also to ask for pain medication or an epidural. Or you may want some simple things to give you comfort, like getting in a warm bath.



It's amazing how hard your body's working at the end of labour. It's a huge physical, emotional and spiritual challenge. It's normal to feel lots of emotions, including feeling used up or afraid. You might even feel angry at the force of what your body's doing. This may have nothing to do with being a trauma survivor. It may be purely the awesome work of giving birth. Your midwife, support person and/or partner are surrounding and taking good care of you. It's okay for you to just let yourself be taken over by the experience. It'll end. By the time your baby needs you, you'll feel like yourself again.

What if You Dissociate in Labour?

You may dissociate in labour. Especially if you are a survivor who got into the habit of dissociative coping (mentally “going away”) when things got scary in childhood. This is okay. This coping method may help you get through the birth, kind of like self-hypnosis. Remember what dissociation is. It's a way of coping that lets a person's thoughts, emotions and physical sensations separate from each other for a bit. When this happens in labour, there's nothing you need to be thinking about anyway. Your midwife will tell you if there's something you need to do (like push!). You'll still be able to do it. You don't really have

to be fully present mentally. The midwife will know what to do. Your birth support person will tell you about parts of the birth that you may not remember after the baby's born.

Some women feel strongly that they don't want to dissociate at all in labour. They'd prefer to stay fully present during the birth of their baby. If this is the case, you should have a plan. You



should think of things you can do to keep yourself from “going away.” Things that can help you stay focused in the present. Some women find talking helpful. Some even joke or complain loudly between contractions. Others plan to sit up, squat or stand late in labour. They do that so they can stay in the most powerful, alert body position they can manage. There’s no single way to give birth. You’ll find your own way and other people will help you.



Practising Your Interpretation Skills

Giving birth can be a really stressful time. It can be even more so if you get hurt feelings. Or if you get angry very quickly. During labour, things that people say or do may feel wrong because you’re so stressed. Maybe the other person is too! Remember that “in the heat of the moment” sorting out what people really mean might be too much to handle. This will be a time to put off “interpreting” until later. Sorting out anything important that happened can be done after the birth. That goes for the relationships with your midwife, partner or labour support person too. This is part of putting the whole story together.

For right now, think of some things you can tell yourself to “postpone” interpreting. Here are some ideas:

“I don’t need to worry about what he said (or did) right now. I can think about it later.”

“People are taking care of me the best they can. I can let my labour partner/protector deal with that.”

“I’m just not going to let anything upset me now. This is my birth, and I want to feel calm and well.”

Putting the whole story together can wait. In the days following the birth, there will be time to talk about how it went. You’ll be able to put the sensations, emotions and ideas about what happened together into a story that makes sense.



Joely's Story

Things to Think About

As you read Joely's story, try and think about what you have learned in Module 6:

- What links might there be between past traumatic experiences and labour?
- What triggers might come up in labour?
- What strong feelings might come up (good and bad)?
- What about labour might make it hard to interpret what people say or do?

Joely is a 28-year-old woman who's pregnant for the second time. Her first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. Joely and her husband Dan waited three years to get pregnant again. They felt they couldn't face it if things went wrong and they lost another baby.

Joely was abused by her dad when she was a teenager. He used to come into her room at night and touch her under her pyjamas. When she told her mum, her mum believed Joely and divorced him. Joely is close to her husband and her mum. But she's been worried during the whole pregnancy.





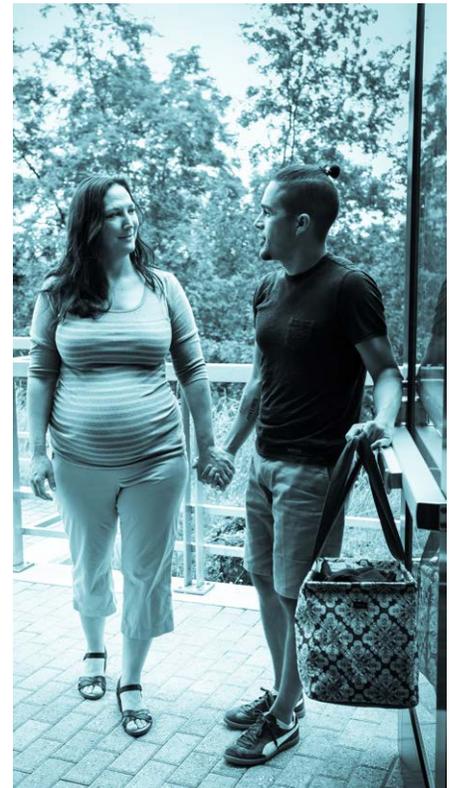
.....
Taking this story one step at a time...

- What past trauma factors could be triggers for Joely in labour?
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.....

When she got pregnant, Joely felt like her body was separate from herself. She felt like her body was not her own. When she thought about the birth it seemed unreal to her, like it wouldn't really happen. The midwife told her to take a childbirth class but she never got around to it. Her mum and Dan said they would both be there when she gave birth. She said, "okay." Joely was really hoping for a natural birth because she heard that was best for the baby.

When Joely went into labour things were okay at first. She and Dan went for a walk early on when it felt normal. When the contractions got stronger, Joely called her mum. Her mum met them at the hospital. Once Joely got admitted, she started to panic. The contractions were getting stronger. But she couldn't focus on the helpful things Dan, her mum and the midwife were saying. Even though they were meant to help her.

The midwife said that Joely should try an epidural. She said "yes." Once she had it, things started to calm down for Joely. But then the midwife needed to do an exam. But Joely didn't feel as calm as she wanted to yet. She asked the midwife to please wait a few minutes. The midwife said she was sorry. She explained that they needed to attach a different type of heart rate monitor to the baby's head. Joely started to feel like something





was wrong. She had very bad, strong thoughts that she might lose this baby too. She started to cry. She didn't know if she was scared about the baby, scared of being examined or both. Joely felt like she was starting to lose it. She felt herself getting that “out of body” feeling she has when she can't cope.



Pausing again to think about Joely's situation . . .

- These intense emotions are a lot to bear. What do you think would be helpful to Joely right now?

 - If you were overwhelmed like this, what would you want to do for yourself?

 - How would you want your support person to help you?
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After a few minutes the midwife wasn't worried about the baby's heart rate any more. Things calmed down. They asked Joely to stay on her left side. She felt wiped out and sad. She felt like a little girl again, not a grown-up woman ready to be a mum. She wasn't happy with the midwife. But she listened to the midwife when she said to try and sleep a bit. Joely went to sleep.

When she woke up, she felt like she needed to push. Everyone helped her to sit up. She told the midwife she didn't want to be examined again. She wanted to get the baby out on her own if she could. The midwife wheeled a big mirror to the foot of the bed. That way, Joely could see the baby's head start to show. The midwife told her the baby was fine and her pushing was working. In the end, the midwife put some gauze in her hand. She put pressure on the area just below where the baby was coming out to support things and prevent tearing. Joely could see in the mirror what was happening and felt happy. She was amazed to see her baby's head. When her daughter was born, she lay back on the bed and held the baby to her chest and cried with joy.



Questions

These questions will help you get to know yourself better. You can use these to talk to your tutor about any worries you have.

If answering a question is too hard or upsets you, just write down a few notes or skip the question.

You don't need to talk about all the questions in this module with your tutor. You can pick the ones most important to you. If you want to, you can also talk about some with a friend or your partner.

1. When Joely felt like she might lose this baby too and felt helpless, what could she have asked for?

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2. What are your thoughts about not being completely in charge or in control of staff members during your labour?

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3. What are your thoughts about not being in control of how strong labour may feel or of being out of control of your body?

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4. How do you plan to cope if you have really strong bad feelings?

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5. What key things do you want your partner or birth support person to know or do?

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6. What phrases can you use to postpone trying to figure out what people mean? *Especially if it seems better to sort it out later?*

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7. What else do you think you might need to get ready and to be okay?

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8. As you can imagine, Joely told her birth story. Most of the visitors didn't know about her sexual abuse history. Most didn't know about her past miscarriage either. So she did not want to tell them all of the trauma-related challenges she had faced. But she did want to tell a story where she claimed her fear, anger, strength and joy. How could she tell a "simple" version?

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9. Who in your life will need to hear a “simple” version of your birth story? Who will get to hear a version with any trauma-related factors added in?

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Contacting Your Tutor

Please use the space below to make some notes for your in-person meeting or telephone call with your tutor. Try to think about:

- Are there any things from your work on this that you’re particularly excited to talk about?
- What more explanation, or help practising, would you like?
- Which parts of the story do you most want to focus on?
- Do you want to talk about how this applies to you—or just to the character?
- Is there any trauma-related help you need right now that you want to discuss?





Checking In With Yourself: Module 6

(Check, fill in, or circle, your choice, as needed. Do this **after** your tutor session.)

1. How well do you think you learned each topic?

.....
You've thought about trauma-related worries in labour.

| | | | | |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Solidly | Enough for now | Just a little bit | Skipped: not importantl | Skipped: too stressful |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|

.....
You have a plan to manage the triggers for PTSD in labour.

| | | | | |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Solidly | Enough for now | Just a little bit | Skipped: not importantl | Skipped: too stressful |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|

.....
You have a plan for calming too-strong feelings in labour.

| | | | | |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Solidly | Enough for now | Just a little bit | Skipped: not importantl | Skipped: too stressful |
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.....
You've practised your “interpreting” skills for labour.

| | | | | |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Solidly | Enough for now | Just a little bit | Skipped: not importantl | Skipped: too stressful |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|

2. How intense was this Module for you? (Score 0–10)

NOTE: Please fill in the blank with your rating of distress on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is the worst distress you can imagine.

Rating at the beginning of the session: _____

Peak Rating: _____

Rating at the end of the session: _____





3. Did you make any plans for the next week to look at needs you have?

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4. Did you agree to practise anything this week?

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5. How would you rate your tutor session?

Really bad 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Really great

6. How would you rate this module's content?

Really bad 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Really great

7. How did your learning go during this module?

Really bad 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Really great





8. How confident or sure are you of your skill?

Not at all sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very sure

9. Most survivors feel as though their birth experience was bad.

- a. True
- b. False
- c. We skipped this part.
- d. We just touched on this, so I don't really know.

10. How sure are you that you can cope with trauma-related worries during labour?

Not at all sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very sure

11. Having a support person while you're in labour can help you manage triggers.

- a. True
- b. False
- c. We skipped this part.
- d. We just touched on this, so I don't really know.

12. How sure are you that you could ask your birth support person to help you de-stress if you're triggered?

Not at all sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very sure





13. Name one tool or strategy you could use to manage strong feelings during labour.

- a.
- b. We skipped this part.
- c. We just touched on this, so I don't really know.

14. How sure are you that you could use this strategy during labour?

Not at all sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very sure

15. Labour is the best time to interpret the actions of others.

- a. True
- b. False
- c. We skipped this part.
- d. We just touched on this, so I don't really know.

16. How sure are you that you could wait until after labour to interpret others' actions?

Not at all sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very sure





Module 6 Supplement

Techniques For Coping With Labour

- * **Working with your breath:** There are lots of different methods that can help during labour. Your breathing style should be what feels comfortable to you. Your breaths should be natural, relaxed and even. Your breathing shouldn't cause you to feel light-headed. Concentrating on your breath can help you feel less distracted during birth. Notice your breathing. Try to focus on breathing deeply in and out. Feel your lungs fill with air.
- * **Breathing methods:** During the beginning stages of labour, you can focus on deep breaths. They help relax your body. During contractions, some women take slow breaths through the contraction. Others will breathe deeply, but quicker, with more breaths in each contraction. Another way to do this is to breathe quickly for three breaths and then blow. Or alternate a quick breath with blowing. In childbirth education classes (like Lamaze), women learn and practise different ways of breathing. That helps them to find out what works for them. The goal is for you to feel comfortable and relaxed.
- * **Support person(s), doula:** One way to cope during labour is to bring someone along who's able to look out for you. This person's only job is to comfort and support you throughout labour and delivery. She pays attention to what you need, and conveys your wishes when you cannot. Your partner may have no experience with birth. Your partner also may have strong emotional reactions during your birth. We recommend asking someone else to be your support person. That person can stay focused on your needs, no matter what. This may be a friend or family member. Someone whom you trust and feel comfortable with. Or you can hire a doula (a professional "birth attendant"). You can find a doula by contacting your tutor, midwife, a childbirth centre or your local hospital.
- * **Letting others speak for you:** Having someone you trust talk to nurses, doctors and midwives about what you want can make your birth experience easier. You may have decided how you want your birth experience to be. But



during labour and delivery, it can be difficult to make those desires known. You'll want someone to tell the providers about them. So you do not have to. Your chosen support person or doula can do this for you. Make sure you speak with that person before the delivery to go over what you want. For example, if you want to give birth naturally, your support person can talk to the providers about that.

- * **Saying what's on your mind/what you're feeling/asking questions:** While others can advocate for you, this is **your** birth experience. You have the right to ask questions! You also have the right to talk about your experience and describe what you're feeling. Having a support person can help get people's attention when you want to speak.
- * **Being alone when you need to be:** Birth can involve a lot of people at once. It can be overwhelming. At times, you may want to have a quiet moment to focus and calm yourself. If you feel like you need this, tell your doctor, midwife, nurse or support person/doula. They should be able to give you a few moments by yourself. If there's something urgent happening related to your health or your baby's health, they should explain the situation to you. They'll arrange for you to have your quiet moment when the situation is resolved.
- * **Different positions:** Labour and birth do not have to happen in just one position. Standing, kneeling or squatting can make your birth faster and less painful. So can sitting on the edge of the bed. In advanced labour, move around until you're in a position where you feel the urge to push. Try different positions to find ones that work for you.
- * **Use of a birth ball:** You can use a birth ball in a few ways. Women in labour can sit on the birth ball to reduce muscle strain. The ball allows you to keep an upright posture. Some women prop the birth ball against the wall and lean on it. They can then squat without help. Some women even place the ball under their hips as they lie down. That helps their hips move as needed.
- * **Hanging from rope/towel/partner:** Sometimes it's helpful to "hang" or pull downward into a squat as you push. Holding onto a rope, towel, or your partner's arms may make pushing easier.



- * **Being in water:** Water can be very calming for mothers during birth and delivery. The warmth can reduce pain and ease sore muscles. Water can also provide a relaxing environment. Keep the water temperature near your body temperature (98.6° F, 37° C). Talk to your midwife about water during labour. She'll tell you what options are available.
- * **Massage:** During labour, massaging legs, arms, shoulders, backs, hands, feet and other body parts can be very helpful. Massage can also relieve pain. Discuss massage with your support person beforehand. That way, your support person will already know what you're comfortable with.
- * **Mantras/affirmations/prayer:** Mantras and prayers can provide a way for you to concentrate on something positive. Rather than on pain or negativity. Mantras and affirmations are statements that are personal, positive and focused on the present. Write a list of positive thoughts that inspire and soothe you. They could be statements about the good things about you and your life. This list may be similar to the list you made in Module 3 when we discussed self-calming. During birth, it can be helpful to focus on these positive statements. You can say them aloud or repeat them silently. An example might be, "This is difficult, but I'm strong and will get through it." You might repeat a prayer that you find comforting. Or read from the list of quotes that you can keep close at hand.
- * **Focusing on an art object:** Like prayers and positive thoughts, focusing on meaningful art can calm you. It can take your mind off pain. You can bring with you a print of a photograph, painting or other art that's soothing. Something that makes you happy. It may be art you've made. Or art that reminds you of the strength you've shown during difficult experiences.
- * **Music:** Music can also be helpful and soothing during birth. Your favourite music can make your surroundings more familiar. Especially if you're in a hospital. Music, art, mantras and breathing can all be part of your birthing experience. The rhythm and meaning of these special things can give you comfort and strength.



- * **Here and now:** You may have lived through horrible things in the past. You may worry those memories or feelings will come back during birth. Birth can be overwhelming. Many survivor mums find it helpful to focus on what they are experiencing right now. Birth can be an experience where you put all your attention on the here and now. Some of the exercises we've written about will help you stay in the present. They'll help you concentrate on your current experience. And get through it. Some of the mindfulness exercises can also help you. They'll show you how to focus on what's happening around you (and within you) during birth.
- * **Guided imagery:** This exercise helps you to guide your imagination to a place where you feel safe, protected and secure. You can do this alone. Or you can ask your support person to guide you. You may begin by relaxing your body as best you can. Then take a few deep breaths. Begin by thinking of an image or location where you feel safe, happy and relaxed. Focus on this image. Then think of all the details within your special space. Think about all the senses you'd use while there. How does it smell? What does it feel like? What do you hear? As you explore this space, continue to relax your body and breathe deeply. When you begin to leave this space, you can count backwards from 10 or 20.
- * **Sharing the experience with your baby:** During pregnancy, it can be helpful to remember the little person who's growing inside you. You can look at books and photographs to see what your baby looks like at each stage of pregnancy. You can talk or sing to your baby while he's growing. Remember that as you're going through labour, your baby is too. During labour, you can still talk or sing to your baby. Remember that your baby is also there with you, sharing the experience. Holding an image of your baby in your mind as you labour might help you concentrate. It might keep you focused on the task at hand.
- * **Keeping hydrated:** Labour is hard work, and women can become exhausted if they don't drink enough. To avoid being dehydrated, try to drink at least four ounces an hour. Try to drink healthy liquids that contain sugar or electrolytes. Something like fruit juice, Gatorade, iced-juice chips or tea with honey. This can give you energy when you need to push.

