

I'm so tired by my baby's needs. Who takes care of me?



MODULE 7

Seeking Birth Family and Alternative Support

Goals Of Module 7

- ✓ Think about which family members are and are **not** safe to be around your baby
- ✓ Think about which family members you can rely on
- ✓ Line up safe, supportive people to help you during these really important months



I'm sure they think I'm the "black sheep" of the family. Really, I'm just the one who decided enough was enough.

I don't think I'll ever let my parents babysit—no way.

With Eyes Wide Open

Nobody really talks about it, but childhood abuse survivors are usually abused by family members. They are often abused by parents, brothers or sisters. Or by members of the wider family.

Of course, many childhood abuse survivors become mothers themselves at some point. And then the situation becomes even more difficult. Their babies are born into families that contain people that shouldn't be allowed around children.

This isn't really a difficult idea to understand. But it can be a difficult one to face.

Some survivors we know don't talk to or see their birth family at all. Sometimes they decided this long ago. It made them feel safer.

Some feel it's something they need to do, but they haven't done it yet. Others decide to do this once they become mothers themselves. They have a strong need to protect their children. Relationships with family members can be painful. So it feels good to have more distance.

Some survivor mums do something in between. They see their birth family sometimes. They visit during family holidays. They see relatives at other special times. But they never leave their children alone with an unsafe family member.





Now is as good a time as any to think about your needs...

If you're making a rule about keeping your child safe, decide what limits you'd like to set. Then decide how to explain this decision. It's important to think about how to explain it to family members and others too.

Your tutor might be a good person to try out this explanation on. You could talk to her about your worries too.

Here are some questions to help you deal with this challenge:

- Who abused you?
- Are you still in contact with the abuser?
- Do you think he or she would be safe to be left alone with a child?
- Does the idea of having that person as a babysitter make you feel worried or stressed?
- What will you do to make sure your child is kept safe?

Who Is Most Helpful When it Comes to Family?

Even in families with lots of problems, there can be somebody who's always loving and supportive. Is there someone you've known your whole life who's been good to you? Does this person already know



about the abuse in your past? If not, could you tell her about it? Would they accept your reasons for not wanting to spend much time with the people who abused you? Would they back you up when it comes to keeping your baby safe?

Sometimes there's no one in the wider family who's safe and special to you. No one who'll provide help to you. Then you may need to look outside your family for help and support. When you're looking for this help, think of friends that you've grown to love and trust. We refer to such people as a woman's "family of choice."



Here are some more questions. This time, we're focusing on assisting you with getting the help you need and deserve.

- Who in your circle of wider family or friends is safe and helpful?

- What can you depend on them for?

Asking for Help in the First Weeks With Your Baby

New mums are going to need help now and again. They especially need help during the last weeks of pregnancy and the first few months after their babies arrive. If you have a partner, this help might be right in your home. Even so, there will be times when your partner is just as worn out as you are. You'll need someone to babysit. You'll need help with the shopping. You'll need someone to drive you to appointments. Sometimes what you really



need is advice. You may even need someone to complain to about how hard it is to take care of a newborn baby.

But what if there isn't anyone you can count on for this kind of help? Well, then you might feel sad or stressed on top of feeling really tired and worn out. It's important to have somebody to call on at times like this. It can help you feel better, so it's best to plan ahead. Most people need some help. So now's a good time to think about this and who'll be there for you.

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Here are some more questions to consider ...



- Can you think about what help you might need in the next few weeks and after your baby is born?

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- Who could help you?

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- Do you have a partner who's helpful? A close friend?

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This programme is here to help survivors of childhood abuse, neglect or sexual trauma. Many women are in relationships as adults that are abusive.

Are you currently in an abusive relationship? That is, a relationship where you're bullied, abused or fear being hurt? Then you deserve help for that too. Please consider telling your tutor. She can connect you with some community resources.

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The Kindness of Strangers

Sometimes people just “know” that others need help! Anyone who’s been a new mother will remember what it was like. You might be worried about asking for help. But most people will be happy to help you. All they ask for is a simple **thank you**.

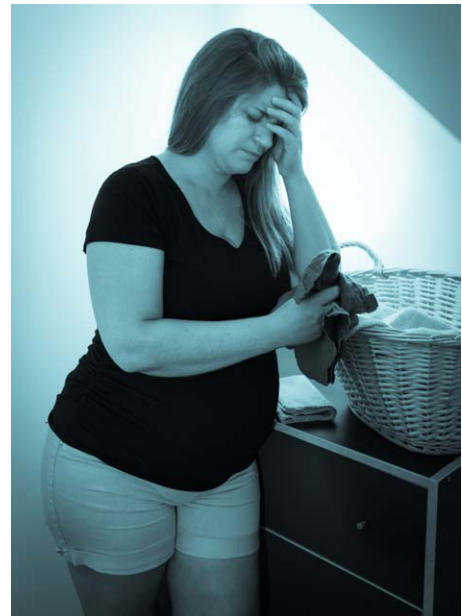
Sometimes the people who reach out to help you become like a new family to you. You may begin to think of them as your “family of choice” and start to really enjoy what they mean to you.

It’s possible that you’ve also looked into groups for new mums. You may also know of places to go where mothers and babies are really welcome. These things exist for a reason! All mums do better if they can get out of the house. It’s great to be uplifted by other mums! And it’s a relief to be around community members who care about making mothers’ lives easier.

It’s possible, though, that you haven’t looked into where you can go to meet people and be supported. Then ask your midwife or your tutor for help. It’s best not to wait until the baby’s arrived. You may be too tired or busy then to figure it out.

Responding to Overwhelming Situations and Feelings

After having a baby, everything can seem really difficult. That’s especially true if you haven’t slept or your baby is fussy. And, of course, if you’d had a difficult birth. Feeling overwhelmed—like it’s all too much—can be very normal. However, some women might feel like this most of the time. In that case, they might have postpartum depression. They’ll need expert help. As we’ve said, feeling overwhelmed



and helpless is a trigger for some survivors. Feeling like this again, after your baby's born, can be a signal to talk about it. It's important to share those feelings with your tutor, midwife or other support person.

It's important to expect to feel sleep-deprived, tired, sore and maybe bored. You may feel unable to keep up with even the simplest things. It's normal and most women get through it just fine. But others might get to a point where it does not feel okay at all. The trouble with feeling overwhelmed is that you probably won't be able to do something about it. That's especially true if you've had no sleep or feel depressed. It might be good to have a plan in place before you need it.



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Getting emergency help ...

- Who can you call in an emergency and say, "I am struggling and I need help now?"

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- Can you let them know—before it happens—that you might need to call on them?

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- Will they come and help you? What would you want them to do?

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Things That Friends or Safe Family Members Could Do to Help

Sometimes you just need a little ordinary help. Think about who you think you most want to ask. Here are some things you can ask someone to do:

- Look after the baby so you can sleep
- Come over and provide support by making you a cup of tea and just chatting
- Help with the washing, cleaning or cooking
- Run an errand for you
- Help you decide if you're doing okay. Or help you choose to call for help from your tutor, midwife or another professional person

Calming—Some More Practise!



It's been a while since we practised calming skills. This might be a good time to do that again. Practising is really important. It gets easier the more times you do it. You'll be glad that you can easily call on your self-calming skills later. Especially if your feelings get out of scale to what's happening!

In the early weeks of mothering, you'll spend a lot of time feeding your baby. A lot of time! Some mums love all this close time. Others start to feel bored and lonely. Feeding times can be times to nurture yourself too. It could be helpful to check in with how you're doing and what feelings might be starting to stack up.

But that's for the near future. Noticing too-loud or too-numbed reactions takes practise. So what have you noticed lately?





***Here are some questions you can ask yourself.
Think about the last week:***

- Has anything happened that made you feel too-strong feelings or no feelings at all (numb)?

- Did you notice times when your feelings didn't match what was happening?

- Were your feelings too “loud” or too “numb?”

- Were you able to calm yourself? How?

When Friends and Family Aren't Enough

It's important to remember that feeling numb or feeling overwhelmed doesn't just happen to survivor mums. After a baby's born, feeling worried and fearful about many things could be a sign of depression. Feeling hopeless could be a sign too. So could thinking the same thoughts over and over again. Any woman—survivor or not—can also have thoughts about hurting herself or her baby. That's a sign of postpartum depression too. But there's help. Has anything happened that made you feel too-strong feelings or no feelings at all (numb)?



Family and friends can help with a lot of things. But the best help they may have to offer if you are having intense feelings that don't go away is this: They can remind you that you are **not alone**. There are people standing by to help you sort out what help you need.

This is really important to remember: After the baby comes, you may have bad feelings or thoughts. If your calming efforts are not working, speak to a professional. If you've not been a new mother before, you may not be able to tell if your struggles are normal or not. Ask for help. Let your midwife or tutor help you decide if you're really okay or not.

Lakeesha's Story

Things to Think About

As you read Lakeesha's story, try to think about what you have learned in Module 7:

- Who is and is not safe to be around you and your baby
- Who in your birth family or family of choice you can rely on for help
- Which safe, supportive people you can line up to help after the baby arrives

Lakeesha's labour and birth went pretty well. She felt good about how it worked out. Now that she's a new mum, though, things aren't going well. She struggles to keep up with the demands of being a mum. So not having the support of family is something she feels more keenly each day. She's on maternity leave from her job at the coffee shop and is taking a term off college. But Lakeesha still feels that being a mum is a lot harder than she'd ever imagined it would be. She's very lonely and frustrated and unsure of herself as a mother.



She started seeing the father of her baby again so she'd have someone around to help. He wanted to move in with her and get married right away. But she was still wary of him and his controlling behaviour. She wasn't ready to get married. He got very angry with her and told her that she had to marry him. He even went so far as to book a social hall for a reception. When he found out that Lakeesha had called and cancelled it, they got into a terrible fight. He pushed her up against the wall by her throat. He said she needed to listen to him and do what he said. He said he'd hurt her and take the baby away from her if she didn't.

Lakeesha had her six-week postpartum visit with her midwife the next week. When she was in the waiting room she noticed a sign about getting help when someone was hurting you. She decided to tell her midwife about all the problems she was having. Even though she was very nervous about it. Lakeesha talked about the fight she had had with her boyfriend. She spoke about the demands of being a new mum and the general lack of support she felt in her life.

First, Lakeesha's midwife urged her to contact the local domestic violence team. Her midwife knew she had no contact with her parents. Then she recommended that Lakeesha ask friends for support. She reminded Lakeesha about the local children's centre's par-



enting classes. She said going to those might be a good way to boost her confidence as a mum.

Lakeesha took the steps the domestic violence team suggested to back away from the relationship with the baby’s father. She worked with them to understand that her need for help was real. But she had to find other ways to meet those needs.

She felt better after she could look inward and see what her most intense needs were. She thought she could make it over the long haul if she could just build in more “me” time. She also thought she could use some help organising meals. A good night of sleep now and then would help too. She had enough of a sense of humour left to joke that what she needed was a nanny and a cook. This helped her think about some other ways to meet those needs.

She posted an ad at the local college. The ad said she’d be willing to trade English conversation training for some household help and babysitting.

She got a response from a college student. Rebecca had newly immigrated to the area. Rebecca arrives after class every Wednesday and watches the baby. Together they also make a big meal. They set aside leftovers for other nights. In exchange for this help, Lakeesha helps Rebecca to learn English. She also helps Rebecca proofread her school assignments. Rebecca also sometimes sleeps over at Lakeesha’s. She does that so she can get up with the baby during the night. So Lakeesha can get a good night’s sleep when she really needs it. Both Lakeesha and Rebecca consider this a good exchange of support.



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. Why does Lakeesha go back to the father of her baby?

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2. Lakeesha is brave. She shares with her midwife that her boyfriend's hurting her and making threats. Is there anyone in your life right now who's hurting or worrying you? If so, how will you keep yourself and your baby safe from that person?

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3. What other places could Lakeesha find where she could be out with other people and lift her spirits? Maybe places where other new mums gather and share good ideas as well as their feelings about the big changes in their lives?

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4. Whom can you trust in your life? Make a list of those people who can help you out.

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5. You may feel “needy” after your baby is born. There may be someone who could help you. You could “trade” and do something to help him or her—now, or later. Whom might you make a trade with?

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6. Lakeesha was really creative in her problem solving. She started by figuring out her biggest needs and thinking of ideas to have them met. What are your biggest needs likely to be?

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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?



Notes

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Checking In With Yourself: Module 7

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

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

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You've thought about who would or wouldn't be safe to be around your baby.

Solidly	Enough for now	Just a little bit	Skipped: not importantl	Skipped: too stressful
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You've thought about whom you can count on for help and support.

Solidly	Enough for now	Just a little bit	Skipped: not importantl	Skipped: too stressful
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You've found safe people to help you during your first days as a new mum.

Solidly	Enough for now	Just a little bit	Skipped: not importantl	Skipped: too stressful
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2. How intense was this module for you?

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. Which of the following are limits some survivor mums put on their family in order to keep their child safe?

- a. Ending contact with family members before they are pregnant
- b. Ending contact with family members now that they are new mums
- c. Keeping relationships with abusers. But not leaving the child alone with an unsafe family member
- d. All of the above
- e. We skipped this part.
- f. We just touched on this, so I don't really know.

10. How sure are you that you will be able to keep your baby safe from abusive family members?

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

11. All family members have a right to babysit because they are family.

- 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 can figure out if a family member is safe and reliable?

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

13. What are two types of people outside of family that you might be able to rely on for help?

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14. How sure are you that you could contact these people?

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

