

I told my birth story to everyone who would listen. Probably more than they wanted to know too!



MODULE 9

Thriving After the Birth

Goals Of Module 9

- ✓ Understand why telling the story of your birth is important
- ✓ Know what to do if you think you might have PTSD or postpartum depression after the birth



I saw my midwife a lot while I was pregnant. Now I'll only see her a few more times!

The Birth Experience

After having their babies, women have all sorts of thoughts about how it went. For lots of women, it's a good experience overall. But this isn't the case for everyone. Maybe there was an emergency, or the baby was born unwell. Sometimes women feel bad about how it went. Maybe because they didn't feel supported or well cared for.

Are Survivors More Likely to Have a Difficult Birth?

Science shows that women who've been abused as children are a bit more likely to feel that giving birth is a traumatic experience. They're also more likely to have PTSD symptoms afterward. The reason isn't what you might think. They seem to feel this way mostly because they felt disappointed with staff. And not at all because they've had more emergencies.





There may also be something about being a survivor that makes giving birth more intense. Already having PTSD may cause this too. Triggers related to labour or the birth might remind survivors of what happened when they were little. So may being in the hospital. Sometimes, survivor mums can have too-strong feelings. It may feel like the abuse is happening again. It can be hard to feel calm again.

Recovery can be even harder in several ways. Other mums can focus on recovering from the physical work of giving birth. But survivor mums may also need to recover from the strong feelings or triggers they experienced.

Having a Plan

But it may be possible to prevent some of the things that make the birth experience feel like a traumatic event. And it seems like planning to cope with the people working with you and the triggers that might happen could help. By now, the skills you can use have become familiar. So is thinking of ideas ahead of time to use in a challenging moment. Let's apply that process to planning your birth.





Preparing for the birth experience...

- Do you think there are any ways giving birth might remind you of your past trauma? Think about the birth itself. For example, does being undressed or being in pain trigger you? Does having a big physical challenge trigger you?

 - Do you think there are any things the staff might do that could remind you of past traumatic experiences? What comes to mind?
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How About a Quick Review of Those Skills?

Think about the PTSD reaction skill. Can you imagine one of those triggers and think of a way to find your quiet side street? Get really specific. How can your labour support person help you? Can that person remind you that you're a grown woman now? Really strong and ready to give birth with a lot of help?



Now think about the calming skill. If you're feeling emotions that are too intense, can you ask for a few minutes alone to re-group? Can you be with just your support person for a few minutes to calm yourself?

Remember that choices in labour will be limited. But you might be able to plan quick things that work for you. Or use self-talk that will help. You can ask your support person—or the staff—to repeat words that help you. Even simple things, like: “You’re doing great.” “Everything’s okay.” “We’re here for you.”

Finally, think about the interpreting skills. Remember that in the heat of the moment, you might just need to postpone interpreting. And what if you're giving birth for the first time and you're in the hospital? Then you really are pretty much in a foreign place! The staff work with



birth every day. But it's all new to you. You may be able to draw great help from the staff. Or you may need to pay more attention to your supporters. It may help a lot to remember that caregiving professionals usually do mean well. So trying to be easy going is an okay plan. But if it doesn't feel right to do what they say, you may have to speak up and say what you need instead. You can always sort out the full story later.



How About Some Practise?

Imagine if late in labour a midwife suddenly did a quick vaginal exam. Without asking (or even telling) you first. Imagine if you asked her to please wait until the contraction was over. But she was paying more attention to the foetal monitor than to you.

You might feel angry and victimised by the midwife. You might feel disappointed in the midwife. She had always been thoughtful and gentle about exams in the past.

- What can you do in the moment to get through the exam okay?
- Can you ask a question then to figure out why she did that?

Imagine that she did that because the baby's heart rate went down a bit. The midwife was doing the exam to help the baby and see how he's doing. She was stroking the baby's head and watching his heart rate. It's a way to check that the baby's okay. Your first thoughts would lead to bad feelings about the midwife. Those, in turn, could leave you feeling like the birth is traumatic. Even if you push the baby out quickly. And the baby is fine.

But if you knew the whole story, you'd feel a lot better about the care she gave you.

There could be a lot going on during your labour and birth. It's really worth it to try to assume good things. It's also important to ask for what you need and to rest into your helpers. You'll have time to sort things out later.



We talked before about having a “travel companion” in these situations. Someone who’ll pay attention and help you find your way and communicate. Having a labour support person who’ll do this for you is really important. You may be able to really improve your birth experience by choosing a birth companion. Someone whose job it is to make sure you DO feel heard and cared for. No matter how busy the staff is or what comes up.



Thinking about that support person ...

- Whom did you decide would be a support person? That is, the person who’ll be with you in labour? How do you think they would interpret what happened in the example above?
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The First Day

For about the first four hours after birth, mum and baby usually snuggle together. They’re both quietly alert. Your baby will look at your face, listen to your voice, and look for milk from your breast. The baby will be taking in the new world outside your body. You’ll pay lots of attention to your baby during these first few hours. You’ll notice the baby’s beauty and curiosity. You’ll also become aware of your baby’s sense of peace when resting in your arms.

You’ll also feel peaceful since the hard work will be over by then. You’ll be keeping your new baby safe in a blanket or on your skin. Many mums begin to breastfeed at this time. After this, your baby will probably be sleepy and you will be too. You should



rest (while you can). Then, after a bit of sleep, most mums really want to talk about their birth.

Telling Your Birth Story

Talking about the birth helps in lots of ways. It helps you make sense—in your own mind—of what happened. It lets you get responses from others. You may want to share feelings of joy, happiness and pride. Or you may want to express your sense of confusion, fear or anger. Your story will depend on how it went for you. But the need to share this very emotional experience will be strong.

Of course, many people just want to hear a short-and-sweet version. They care about you and want to know you're okay. But you'll want to talk with at least one

person in detail about what happened. When a woman is birthing a baby, she's focused on coping, breathing and pushing. So much so that she only knows what happened from her own point of view. If the birth was really stressful, she may have missed some parts of the process. She might have lost track of events. Talking to your birth companion or your partner may help you make a complete story. They can help you put together all of the pieces.

Women who feel they didn't have a good experience may want to share this with their midwife. You may want to do that if you feel like you weren't looked after properly. This might be difficult. But it's not good to take home a grudge if things can be easily sorted out. You deserve the chance to ask questions and hear other points of view.



Some women may feel their birth is traumatic. Even if it “actually” turned out well. If this is your situation, you may have a harder time telling your story. Especially if others don’t see it in the same way. We’ve been told that many women feel better when they stay true to themselves. You may need to say something very simple, like this, for example:

“I know that it turned out just fine. But I’m feeling shaken up by it anyway.”

This lets you keep your story a “work in progress.” Until you have the chance to put the pieces of what happened together. Or until you have the support you need to tell the story in a way that satisfies you. A way that includes all of the feelings you have about it.

You can call your tutor and tell her the story. Even though you might be finished with the *Survivor Mums’ Companion* programme once you’ve had your baby. She’ll be really glad to hear how things went for you. She’s a good person to hear the “full” story. And yes, with the survivor-mum parts added in!

Telling the story of any traumatic experience is part of healing from it. It’s important to knit together memories, physical feelings and emotions about it all. That includes thoughts and judgments about the experience too. This may be too much to do with friends. If you’re finding it hard, talk with your tutor. She can help you find a counsellor to talk to.

Remember that more survivor mums have good experiences than bad. And you’re preparing and making plans. You’re being thoughtful and will be able to ask questions and get help. There’s every reason to believe your story will be a great one!





Finding someone to talk to ...

- Since you're doing a lot of planning, we'd like you to consider planning one more thing. Can you plan whom you'll be able to talk to after the birth? Someone who can hear the whole story? Will you be able to talk to that person about any trauma-related challenges you had? And about how you met them?
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Looking After Yourself

In the days after birth, new mums need to remember to take care of themselves as well as the baby!

A really useful way to remember this is to use the word **NURSE**. Each letter in that word stands for a different thing that all new mums need.



Nourishment (food and drinks, avoiding alcohol)

Understanding (from friends or partner about your personal feelings)

Rest and Relaxation (a bath, sleep and help with night feeding)

Spirituality (whatever makes you feel better and hopeful)

Exercise (stretching and short walks—with your baby or while someone babysits)*



Sometimes what you may need most is just time to think about what you have been through, how it went, and how you're feeling now. If

*This list is adapted from: Sichel, D., Watson Driscoll, J. (1999). *Women's moods: What every woman should know about hormones, the brain, and emotional health*. New York. William Morrow and Company.



you're having a hard time, we hope you know you can get help. But it's also great to think back and feel good if you had a wonderful time. It's not easy to get time to think in the days after bringing a new baby home. We want you to know that it's important that you **take time to be proud of yourself**. This can be part of practising emotion regulation by making time to feel good, safe and well!

Postpartum Depression

You've probably heard of **Postpartum Depression**. Women with this condition become very worried or sad after giving birth. Sometimes they feel hopeless too. Depression is the best known problem that women have. But other problems can occur, such as PTSD or anxiety. Women can (very rarely) have problems with their thinking too. That problem is called **Psychosis**.



Some women will struggle after birth. But usually only if they had such issues before becoming pregnant. Are you a survivor mum who's already had PTSD or depression? Anxiety or other mental health conditions? Then it's really important to notice how you're doing. Especially after having your baby.

After your baby's born, you'll have visits with health professionals a few times. They'll ask you how you're feeling. They'll also check on any stitches and check on the baby too. If you mention you're feeling down, they may think this is the "baby blues." Any new mother may cry more or feel sad as her hormones get back to pre-pregnancy levels. "Baby blues" goes away on its own, usually pretty quickly.

But what if your sad feelings last longer than a week or two? Or you think about wanting to harm yourself or your baby? Then you MUST speak to a health care professional right away! Your tutor or midwife is a great place to start. There's a lot of help. Don't wait.

Can You Stop Postpartum Depression Before it Happens?

Having a positive birth can help women to feel better afterward. So preparing and feeling strong may help! Having a mellow baby who sleeps and eats well can also help. Although if we could order up one of those we'd all do it! Being taken care of well can also help. But even if you have or do all of those things, postpartum depression can still come on.

If you have used antidepressant medication in the past, postpartum can be a good time to use it again. Some women may already be taking medicine in pregnancy. Others who have used it in the past ask to have medication on hand. That's so they can start taking it as soon as the baby's born. They think of doing that as a prevention measure. If you can, it's good to talk about this before birth. But you can reach out and ask to talk about counselling or medication at any time.





Making a mental health plan

- Are you worried about how you are feeling now? Do you want to make a mental health plan for after the baby comes?
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Something to Remember!

Most women, including survivor mums, find their birth to be a good experience. They feel okay after the birth. As you work through this *SMC* programme, you may think you're always planning for the worst. Yet there's every reason to expect the best.

Our hope is that you come to know yourself. And your needs. Your time spent working through the *SMC* modules will help you be prepared for anything. Chances are, these “just-in-case” plans won't be needed. It's much more likely that your support people will share your joy in becoming a strong and healthy mum!

Alexei's Story

Things to Think About

As you read Alexei's story, try to think about what you have learned about in Module 9:

- How might Alexei benefit from telling her birth story?
- What can Alexei do if she's worried about herself? Even after the baby comes?

Alexei's pregnancy was going well. She and Jim attended prenatal classes, and she read a few books about childbirth. Alexei continued to feel uncomfortable during her pregnancy. She couldn't wait for it to be over. She tried very hard to think of other things to distract herself. She even pretended she wasn't pregnant at all.





Alexei got really good at doing this. So good that when she went into labour she told herself that she just had a stomach ache. Then she and Jim realised that her “stomach aches” were actually contractions. So they went to the hospital.

Alexei was in the late stages of labour! She was admitted very quickly.

The staff took her into a delivery room. They took her blood pressure and listened to her baby’s heartbeat. Alexei kept asking them to stop. She felt that she needed more time. Besides, she didn’t want to be touched. The midwife explained that she needed to do a vaginal examination. But it all seemed very rushed. Alexei wasn’t ready for the exam, and it hurt. The midwife didn’t seem to notice her distress.

She told Alexei that it was time to push the baby out. Alexei felt very uncomfortable having so many strangers around her. She felt very exposed. Everyone told her to push, breathe or hold her breath. Several people were looking at where the baby was coming out. They all seemed excited and thought they were helping.

Alexei thought she was really going to lose it. She felt overwhelmed. She couldn’t cope with having to “perform” in front of all these



strangers. She realised that there was no way to make it stop, however. She finally just started pushing like mad.

Her baby boy, Jake, was born healthy. Everyone praised her for doing a great job. Afterward, on the surface, everything seemed very normal. She had done everything “right,” and everyone around her was happy for her. But inside Alexei felt numb. She tried to not let it get to her. After all, she’d had a healthy baby boy, right? She wanted to talk about how she’d felt. But nobody seemed to want to hear her “real” story. They were all enjoying telling how Jake came so fast and how exciting it was. She did not even know the name of the midwife who had delivered her son.

As the weeks went by, Alexei healed well physically from the birth and Jake grew normally. But Alexei felt very tired and sad most days. She had dreams about being naked and sore. She sometimes woke up with tears on her cheeks.

Jake, meanwhile, was a bit of a “fussy” baby. He needed to be held a lot or he would cry! Alexei started to feel more and more on edge when Jake started to fuss. She felt trapped by having to be always present to all of his needs. She even started having fantasies about tossing him out of the window when he cried. Alexei knew it was wrong to feel that way. So she started to think that her old fears about having a baby were right. She wouldn’t be able to be a good mum. She was no good.

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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. Alexei's birth went really fast. But she didn't feel okay about the way the staff and her support people got all caught up in the excitement. They forgot to help her! What could she have done?

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2. What could Alexei do about her need to pull together the "real" story of her birth? One she could tell to a person who really cared to hear the whole truth about it?

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3. Do you think that Alexei might be having postpartum depression or PTSD? If so, what signs do you see of that?

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4. What would you do to recover from a labour that goes differently than you'd hoped?

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5. What are "baby blues?" How do those "blues" differ from postpartum depression?

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6. Could you suggest some N.U.R.S.E. ideas for Alexei?

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7. How do you know she could use some professional help?

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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 9

(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?

.....
You've learned about the importance of telling your birth story.

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

.....
You have a plan for what to do if you think you might have PTSD or depression.

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

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. Why is telling your birth story so important?

- a. You can get a fuller picture of your birth and “take it all in.”
- b. If there were things that you couldn’t see or understand when they were happening, you can go back and get information about them.
- c. If you felt your birth was traumatic, talking about it can be good for your mental health.
- 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’ll have someone to listen to your story?

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

11. What five words does NURSE stand for?

N

U

R

S

E

We skipped this part.

We just touched on this, so I don’t really know.





12. How sure are you that you'll remember to get all five "NURSE" needs met most days?

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

13. What two signs show you that your feelings aren't "baby blues?" (Signs that you may have postpartum depression instead?)

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14. How sure are you that you could get help if you're feeling depressed? Especially over an extended period of time?

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

