

Birth and mental well-being – you matter too!

Most baby books and antenatal classes focus on what it is like to give birth physically, but very few prepare parents for the emotional side of giving birth. What is it like to give birth from an emotional point of view?

Perhaps the beginning of labour was not what you planned. Perhaps complications developed during pregnancy, or labour started early. Premature birth can be frightening. Premature babies are usually taken to special care and are hooked up to wires and monitors. The sounds, sights and smells of a special care baby unit can be unfamiliar, and alarm bells ringing can induce anxiety. Staff and other parents are on hand to help in these situations and can provide you with a lot of emotional support.

Most babies make a wonderful recovery, but the emotional effects of premature birth on parents can take longer to recover from. It is known that parents who had a premature baby can develop PTSD or PND symptoms – often later when their babies are home and the immediate danger has passed. It's really important to look after your emotional well-being and to value this as much as your physical health.

What if you had to go to hospital to be induced? Many parents have not been in hospital before and it can feel unfamiliar. Partners can usually stay for most of the day, but are encouraged to go home in the evening if labour has not started. This can leave some women feeling alone and anxious. Think about what you can do to prepare for this scenario. What comfort items can you have with you to help you to relax and to feel safe?

Often there can be anxiety about whether labour has started. If you planned a hospital birth it can cause uncertainty deciding when to go in to the unit, and anxiety if you are sent home again.

Watching a funny movie, taking a walk, talking, listening to music, relaxing or trying to sleep can help. Some people go to hypnobirthing classes or relaxation classes to help them to prepare emotionally for the birth, with techniques to help them feel calm and in control.

It can help to make several different birth plans in advance of the birth to help you to think about different scenarios and what you would want to happen in each of them. Plan A for example may be a water birth at home or in the midwife-led unit with minimal pain relief and intervention, delayed cord clamping, immediate skin to skin, no rush to weigh baby, establish breastfeeding, etc. Your plan B might look different: a transfer from home to hospital, or from the midwife-led unit to the consultant-led unit. Think what you might need in that scenario and how you can prepare to feel calm, safe and involved in all decision-making. Perhaps plan C is an instrumental delivery such as suction or forceps, or a C-section birth. How can this birth be the 'best possible' birth in that circumstance? What can you do to remain calm and well supported emotionally? Can you still have music playing in theatre? How can your birth partner encourage you? Can you practise breathing and visualisation? Perhaps you can have a 'gentle C section' where your baby is born more slowly. Perhaps you can still have skin to skin during theatre and delayed cord clamping. Think through different scenarios in advance to help you to feel mentally reassured and prepared, and to know what your options are even in different circumstances.

It is really important that women feel safe emotionally in order to give birth. They need to feel supported and uninterrupted, with kind people around them. They need to feel respected and to have their dignity protected. They need to be fully informed, given options and choices, to be given clear explanations, and to have their consent sought for any interventions.



When a woman doesn't feel safe and respected or she feels out of control or not listened to, PTSD can flourish post-birth. If there is something you do not understand, ask. If you do not feel safe, tell the staff. Speak up if you have any concerns.

If you need to ask questions during the birth the acronym BRAIN can help:

B – What are the benefits of this course of action?

R – What are the risks?

A – Are there any alternatives?

I – What are the implications of following this course of action – are other interventions more likely?

N – What if we wait for an hour or two and do nothing?

Birth partners can help you to feel relaxed and supported. Talk to your birth partner in advance about how you deal with stress and what you need in terms of support. Talk to them about the kind of worries and anxieties that usually play on your mind so that they can reassure you during the birth. Remember that birth partners need support too. Talk to each other about your experience of the birth. Love and communication are keys to protecting your emotional well-being during this most amazing time of your lives.



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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