

Birth after sexual abuse

One mother shares her story

foreword by
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artwork
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We like to assume that all pregnant women approach their births healthy and robust in body, mind and spirit. This of course is not always the case. Some pregnant women face health challenges whilst others face demanding life challenges.

Particular life challenges, life patterns or issues can carry with them a 'wild card' which can impact the way the pregnant woman gives birth. I'm not talking here about medical risk factors; I'm referring to psycho-social risk factors which can form part of the unconscious matrix—the invisible factors at work in birthing and mothering—which can come out of left field and blindside birth intentions or hijack postnatal bliss.

We may not know when or how these psycho-social risk factors—these life circumstances, issues or patterns—will play out in the birth or postnatal time. We just know that they will. If understood, prepared for and supported these wild cards can bring forward opportunities for positive resolution and healing of 'old stuff'.

Sexual abuse histories can create just such highly charged wild card dynamics in a birth, as one mother found when *'the body's secrets; its memories, its terrors, its fears bared as labour broke the gates clouding the labyrinth of memory in my body.'*

When such a triggering occurs, deep feelings and body sensations are activated and distress from the past swamps the present.

In the absence of psychological awareness and support, many of the birthing women who carry a sexual abuse wild card can get stuck in their old memories and behaviour patterns during labour. Their bodies release floods of stress hormones, or may become armoured and shut down, which left unrelieved will lead to dysfunction in the labour, as illustrated by this woman's story. *'I discovered after the caesarean birth of my daughter, how my being raped (by a woman) as a child affected me during my labour; when at the hospital I experienced an unsafe environment and a very rough vaginal examination.'*

However in birth situations where psychological and kinaesthetic triggering can be supported, a deep healing may be facilitated in the mother.

The following story gifted to me by a courageous woman I worked with many years ago illustrates this healing and transformational potential.

Putting past pain to rest

I planned three perfect home births.

My first son was born in hospital after a long fairly typical first labour, under epidural. My second son was born after a hard labour in hospital by caesarean section.

My personal journey following this is now jumbled in time and memory. I remember talking to Rhea after my second son was born saying that I felt like a cupboard door was crammed shut and full...to open it would be to have everything tumble out.

Sometime over the next few years it felt like the cupboard came open.

Sometime over those years I also had a miscarriage which reminded me of the sadness I still held for the births I had dreamed of and the joy of pregnancy, babies and femininity.

Then I was pregnant again, but the 'perfect birth' was out of reach with concerns of over forty, previous caesar, big baby. Not until late did I dare hope for any birth that was not a caesar let alone birthing in my place.

I did not visit Rhea till late in the pregnancy; too much to hope, too much to lose.

Finally a possibility and I knew I had to come clean (funny term!) if I was to have the possibility of birthing and healing.

What she had to tell me was her experience of sexual abuse that had scarred her early life and made her childhood home a defiled and unsafe place. As we explored this history as it related to her previous birth experiences it became clear that part of her drive for homebirths had been an unconscious yearning to 'make clean—to purify—her own home' for her children. However this





"I needed a safe place for every part of me"

yearning was thwarted because another legacy of her childhood experience was that due to other health issues she had also spent blocks of time in hospital. These times became times of respite from the sexual abuse, hence hospital came to represent a clean, safe sanctuary. So as well as the triggering of trauma based body memory during her labours, releasing a rush of emotional and somatic flashbacks, an unconscious double-bind was also playing out in her previous births.

Rhea asked me what I needed in this labour and I surprised myself by knowing:

I needed NOT to be left alone
I needed to be kept as woman
I needed to be firmly reminded it was safe to let my baby be born
I needed a safe place for my spirit

Labour; a very beautiful twenty-four hours of slow, special labour, just my man and me. Then it got tougher...

I was left alone for one BIG contraction and oh how I made them suffer.

I did forget I was woman and got a little tiny voice and faced a big OGRE...Rhea was there talking, talking, talking me back to womanhood and birthing, eye to eye—strength, equality.

Cervix opened and opened then stuck and my baby not coming. Rhea talked and we walked, they all cajoled, held, surrounded, gave me a safe space. Still not quite enough but I could feel them

all there for me making it safe, loving CLEAN.

I wanted to go to the hospital; it was clean and safe for me there but not one of them would let me.

You can do it.

I can't, I can't, I can't.

You can, you can, you can.

Was that me raging, yelling fighting. It wasn't that little child. It must be the woman, maybe I can do it. But I needed; I needed a safe place for every part of me. I needed strong eyes (I badly wanted a little sympathy). I needed to be walked, to be moved (I wanted to lie down and make it all go away). I needed the checking: where are you now?

What do you need now?

Stuck, stuck, stuck. Can't do it.

On the toilet—ooh the strength in that pain. Then I heard a scream and I felt myself as part of the universe, I touched stars, saw mothers way back in time and there she was, my darling, darling baby girl.

Finally I knew my first two babies could never have been born at home.

Without someone making my place safe.

Without sharing past pain and putting it to rest.

Without the talking, walking, holding, loving.

I just could not have done it.

But now I have, not alone like then. And for me... just the perfect births; each perfect for me. 🐣

