

Facing birth fears

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Introduction

Most mothers are anxious, and even afraid, to give birth. Midwives need to understand the motivating factors if they are to truly help women face their fears.

Although birth anxiety is often dismissed as nothing more than fear of the unknown, it has a direct physiological effect on a woman. The evidence suggests that fear may cause the onset of active labour to be delayed, increase the amount of pain felt by the mother, and can even lead to higher rates of elective Caesarean, pre- or post-term delivery, low-birthweight babies or neonatal breathing difficulties.

And yet midwives can make a tremendous difference. By addressing the root of the fear itself, you can help mothers to achieve a better, faster, less painful and more empowering birth experience.

Choose your words wisely

Something that may seem like a harmless comment to a midwife or doctor could change a woman's birth experience. One of the best ways of reassuring a woman during birth is to keep her fully informed about her labour progress and the different choices available to her, without frightening her. If you are able to suggest any actions or interventions about which you feel strongly, explain why you feel this way, but allow her to make the final decision, unless of course this would endanger her or her infant's life.

Even a comment as seemingly harmless as: "Wow, you're carrying a big baby!" could fill the woman with doubt about her ability to give birth naturally, and could conjure up terrifying images of vaginal damage, when all you really meant was that her baby is developing well. If an expectant mother is upset by a colleague's comments, take it upon yourself to reassure and comfort her.

Friends and family

In her book *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*, Ina May Gaskin re-quotes Stephen King: "Believe me, if you are told that some experience is going to hurt, it will hurt. Most pain is in the mind, and when a woman absorbs the idea that the act of giving birth is excruciatingly painful – when she gets this information from her mother, her sisters, her married friends and her physician – that woman has been mentally prepared to feel great agony".

How very apt. When a woman is repeatedly told horror stories about birth, she is more likely to focus on these than the many positive possibilities. Gaskin advises that the best way of overcoming this negativity is to repeatedly tell empowering and positive stories. Remind the expectant mother that each birth is unique, and that we have an evolutionary instinct for giving birth, and provide her with constant reassurance and encouragement.

The bad birth cycle

Often, repeated fear during pregnancy, or fear of birth, is linked to a fundamental distrust, either of the healthcare system or of a woman's own body. The latter is especially true if she has had a history of miscarriages. She might think that if her body failed her with those pregnancies, that this birth might be no different. How can she become excited, or filled with positive expectations if her dreams may yet again be dashed? And if a mother feels that she was left to fend for herself in labour, or that the staff didn't really support her during her last birth, she may be worried that she'll experience the same neglect this time around. Mothers also often feel guilt or remorse about their last birth, especially if the health professionals (or the mother herself) did not make the best decisions. This can occur regardless of whether the decisions were evidence based, or simply because the unique emotions of birth were not respected.

Often, simply talking about her previous birth experience will help a mother to work through her emotions. She will realise just how much she learned from her previous experience, and that she now knows what to do differently. Remind her that a new, positive birth experience can help heal the wounds of previous negative ones.

The depiction of birth in the media and movies

Although it is unlikely that a woman will be afraid of giving birth after watching a birth scene from a movie, it is likely that she will have misperceptions about her upcoming birth. Movies are filled with misleading birth clichés, and you may need to explain to a mother that when her waters break, they don't necessarily splash on the floor all of a sudden, that labour takes place in four stages and is not instantly painful, and that birth is actually far better and less painful when performed in a standing position.

Sexual abuse

If a woman has ever been sexually abused, it will affect her entire life, including the birth of her own children. Sexual abuse is one of the most common causes of long-term emotional and physical stress, and can manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder. Women who have experienced sexual abuse also often struggle to trust people. Usually, the sexual offender was someone they trusted – an uncle, a family friend, or even a father. These trust issues will be worse if she told someone about the abuse, and that person refused to believe her.

Because of this, the expectant mother's relationship with you may be compromised, and yet she needs to be able to trust you enough for you to guide her through her pregnancy and birth. Midwives need to make sure that they know how to interact with women who face these particular fears.

If an expectant mother confides in you about previous sexual abuse, it can be very difficult to know how to respond. Don't pity her, recoil in horror, or say anything that could be misconstrued as being judgemental or dismissive. Rather admire her for her courage and determination, and ask if she has received, or would like to receive, professional counselling, which you could help her to access through:

- *Life Line*: 0861 322 322 or www.lifeline.co.za
- *Rape Crisis*: www.rapecrisis.org.za or info@rapecrisis.org.za
- *Speak Out*: www.speakout.org.za
- *Famsa*: www.famsa.org.za

Focus on the positive

Pregnancy and birth can be an extremely positive experience for a woman. You are the person to whom she will turn during this time. So, your attitude has a direct influence on whether her birth will deepen her fears and wounds, or whether it will heal and empower her as no other experience could. A positive birth can have a ripple effect which lasts for generations. The confidence and boost to the self-esteem that a woman experiences after a birth about which she feels good will have a positive spin-off on almost every aspect of her life. A woman is the hub of the home, so this will affect her family too, leading to more emotionally secure children and a happier family all round. You cannot change the past, but you can positively influence the future of this mother and child.

References

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