

Processing the Birth Experience with the Woman

by Phyllis Klaus LMFT, LMSW

The childbirth experience lives on in the new mother's thoughts and emotions as she integrates her prior expectations with all of the rewarding, challenging, painful, frightening, exhausting, and demanding aspects of it. She needs to make sense of her childbirth by reconstructing it and putting into words what happened and how she felt. Of course, if she feels triumphant, powerful, and fulfilled by her child's birth, having a chance to recall the details and relive the joy will reinforce the positive aspects, enhance her self-esteem, and deepen her satisfaction. Negative or mistaken impressions, however, do not go away if they remain unresolved; in fact, they tend to fester and grow. If the birth was traumatic for her or her baby, early processing and reframing may even prevent later Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Postpartum Depression. If she is angry at or disappointed in herself, in people who were there, or over the events that occurred, she will benefit from a caring, empathic listener who acknowledges and validates her feelings. When the time is right, this person can help her to a more comfortable or positive perspective with the hope of Posttraumatic Growth.

Suggestions for the Caregiver

- I. Before the birth, indicate that you will be most interested in the woman's feelings after the birth
 - A. Before you get together for a postpartum visit, tell her you would like to go over it with her in detail
 - B. Allow enough time for a thorough discussion
- II. At the postpartum visit, introduce the subject in an open-ended way
 - A. "Even though I was there, I'm interested in knowing what this experience was for you. What are some of the things that stand out most?" OR
 - B. "Would you like to review your labor from the beginning?"
- III. Goals of getting together to review the birth experience
 - A. For both the mother and the caregiver, an accurate picture of what happened and why
 - B. A positive impression of the woman's participation
 - C. For the woman, a feeling that she is heard, understood, respected, and cared for
 - D. For the caregiver greater understanding of what the experience was for the woman
 - E. Feedback for the caregiver from the mother regarding her/his role
 - F. A degree of closure to the relationship, if appropriate
- IV. Purposes of getting together to review the labor and birth
 - A. To assist the mother in reconstructing the experience
 - B. To acknowledge and validate her feelings
 - C. To clarify or correct misconceptions or misunderstandings
 - D. To fill in any "missing pieces" and answer questions
 - E. To help her deal with disappointment, guilt, or anger, even if the caregiver is the target of some of those emotions
- V. Methods to use to achieve the goals
 - A. Explanation/clarification of events
 1. Review of chart or notes by doula or appropriate caregiver
 2. Questions and answers
 - B. Active listening
 - C. Constructive feedback ("I-messages")
 - D. Acknowledgment and validation of feelings
 - E. Appropriate allocation/acceptance of responsibility
 - F. Planting "seeds of accomplishment"—compliments in reference to specific events from the labor
 - G. Good timing when shifting from listening to giving feedback to planting seeds to concluding the session
- VI. Include Partners As Appropriate
- VII. Some notes of caution:
 - A. Processing can take a long time, especially when the experience was frightening or traumatic
 1. Repression of recall protects the new mother as she takes on the tasks of new parenthood; she may not deal with her feelings about the birth at all, or for months or until a subsequent pregnancy
 2. Even if she is not ready, the caregiver can plant seeds of accomplishment that the mother will recall when she begins to process the birth
 - B. Sometimes the caregiver (or whoever is the listener) is the target of some anger or disappointment; it requires patience, non-defensiveness, and good communication skills to respond appropriately
 - C. Some women have birth experiences that require more than one session or some intensive counseling to come to terms with a negative experience or a poor outcome
 - D. Some women are traumatized by birth experiences that would not be troubling to others; it is important to accept her perceptions as her reality because prior life events can make some women more vulnerable than others

Conclusion:

Early intervention, in the form of unhurried, open-minded, and open-hearted processing of the birth experience, can enhance the positive aspects of the birth (and the woman's role in it) and prevent psychological trauma. Delay or avoidance of this discussion misses an opportunity to positively influence a woman's long-term self-esteem and mental health.