

Processing Birth

Okay, birth partner, she's had the baby, that childbirth preparation has paid off. She made it through the experience physically and emotionally intact. Or has she?

As a support person or caregiver, it is very important to take the time to work with a mom through the process of "processing" her birth experience. It is key to remember that, even if you never left her side, her memory of the birth may differ significantly from your memory of it.

She may remember words, phrases, touches, tones that you missed. She may remember a moment of shame or joy that you did not experience in any way. That is not to say that you weren't tuned in or that she was zoned out. It is just that birth is a highly charged, physically, emotionally, and mentally taxing experience that only the labouring woman experiences wholly.

She is undergoing something profound and life altering. And no two births are alike. She may have challenges or struggles with the very parts of the labour that you perceived as "quick" or "easy." For example, women may struggle emotionally after extremely rapid labours, or very short pushing stages (yes, it's true) because they weren't emotionally or physically prepared for how short the labour could be. Don't doubt me, doubters. Talk to someone who has had a rapid birth.

She may also struggle at the point in a subsequent labour where she got "stuck" in a previous labour. For example, if, at 6 cms, she was sent for a c-section last time, expect 6 cms to be an emotional hurdle for her in any subsequent birth experience.

So, how can you help her process her birth experience? First, let her tell her story to you. Don't interrupt her, don't correct her, don't clarify. Just listen to her words and how she tells the story. Listen to her timeline. The labouring woman often has her sense of time quite skewed and that is okay. Just let her tell it her way the first time. Encourage her to write it down or write her version down for her.

Secondly, write your version of the story, as you experienced it. Write about how you felt, and what you saw and heard.

Next, sit with her, and talk about the birth. Ask her about what was the best part(s), and the most traumatic moment(s). Explore that with her.

If she is struggling with a choice that a caregiver made, discuss it with her. Often you heard something said that she didn't hear, or didn't absorb, as to why things were done. It may help her understand. That said, if you don't understand why things went the way they did, either, go with her to a post-partum visit with her caregiver and support her as she asks about the birth.

Finally, give her your version of the birth story, sealed in an envelope, for her to open if and when she is ready.

She may never want to see it. Or she may open it before the door closes behind you. The point is to make it her choice to hear your version. Her version may be just fine for her. If she thinks she was in hard labour for hours and hours, but she made it through like a goddess, does she really need to know it was 16 minutes?!

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