

# **The Art of Birth**

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## **Introduction**

Birth is an entrance into the world and it has an impact that stays with us throughout life. The kind of birth we experience is our first introduction to life and although we may not be intellectually conscious, we are certainly conscious on a cellular and unconscious level. During the first days and weeks of life we take in an enormous amount of information and the experience of this period has a major effect on the way we experience and respond to life and other people.

There is a large body of literature supporting:

- natural birth,
- home birth,
- psychological effect of a mother's psyche and her environment on the foetus,
- traumatic birth affecting the baby and the mother,
- difficult life experiences of mother (& father) activated during pregnancy,
- Psychological therapies that support a wide range of issues.

We explore our early childhood in therapy but rarely look at the impact of our birth on our later development.

We have a large amount of technical/medical support for pregnancy and birth but very little psychological or emotional support for an expectant mother – and father. Pregnancy is a time of change, in all respects, yet it is rarely acknowledged as being anything but a medical procedure. Research indicates that anxiety and fear during pregnancy has an adverse affect on the neurodevelopment of the foetus. Difficult life experiences may certainly be activated during this time but there is no immediate availability of psychological intervention to support these processes.

## **Why Psychological/Emotional Support During Pregnancy?**

There are several areas regarding pregnancy and birth where emotional support could be of assistance:

- exploring how our own birth experience has shaped our life;
- our previous birth stories;
- the effect of pregnancy and birth on the baby and mother;
- high risk and low risk women (and the grey area in between);
- changing the consciousness of pregnancy and birth from negative to a positive potential;
- reducing fear about giving birth;
- working through loss and grief (i.e. miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, still births, abortion and infertility);
- how our past or current experiences can affect our well being during pregnancy, birth and the post natal period.

We can think about a pregnant woman as someone on a spectrum of high risk to low risk. If a woman is already in the care system she may be more likely offered psychological support which addresses not only her issues practically but hopefully takes into account her pregnancy. However, there are many other women who may have had a range of experiences which pregnancy can activate such as: miscarriage, abortion, sexual abuse, parental neglect, bereavement, loss, marriage problems, lone parents, teenage parents, trans generational trauma, et cetera but are too frightened to address them, or not conscious of their influence. While pregnancy may precipitate a symptom like depression, for which help could be available, many women have had very challenging experiences which may never find an outlet or resolution. 'It is estimated that 30% of domestic violence cases start or escalate during pregnancy and domestic violence is associated with increases in rates of miscarriage, low birth weight, premature birth, foetal injury and fetal death' (DH, Maternity Matters, 2007). Only a small percentage of high risk women are pregnant but there are a lot of women in the 'grey' area, with unresolved issues or psychological problems. They may be in varying degrees of distress, develop post natal depression, problems with mother/infant bonding or pass unresolved issues onto their children. Ante natal psychological support/therapy may not be an option, primarily because of the cost and because it is not readily available on the NHS or seen as an important part of the birth procedure which complements exercise (like yoga), nutrition and the medical support. Supported birth should be available to all women should they feel they need it.

Some people are cynical about the idea that birth can be natural, gentle, trauma free, even relatively pain free, rather than medical, painful, something to fear, blot out or anaesthetise. But the more women, who do experience this positive possibility, make it more 'normal' for other women to do the same. While giving birth is not easy, fear is the most debilitating factor which impedes the natural birth flow.

### **The Current Mainstream Climate**

Currently, there is the growing emphasis (both from the Government and elsewhere) on 'natural' birth being the preferable option to medically assisted births, as medical interventions are always increasing and costly to the Government (i.e. every 1% rise in c-sections cost the NHS £5 million). Statistically over half of births require medical intervention which means women are more often than not disappointed when their desired outcome, of a 'natural' birth, is not achieved. Why is this? I think it has to do with several factors. Firstly, there is the emphasis on birth being something dangerous and a procedure which only medically trained people (and usually obstetricians who are male - in most cases) can undertake. There is not the message that a woman's body knows exactly what to do and she can do it perfectly well given the space and time with a supportive midwife/doula/other. Realistically the majority of births could be natural with only a small percentage needing medical intervention. Today the picture is quite different. Around 53% of births need medical intervention which leaves less than half of all births in the UK being natural (NHS statistics)! The caesarean rate is at 23% (43% in the USA!) and around half are elective! Once again why is this? Why would a woman want to rob herself of a powerful rite of passage experience to have major abdominal surgery unless it was due to a particular health risk? (The Government are thinking about making it a non elective procedure, which leaves women no choice but to try for the natural approach). I personally believe that since the rise of feminism – independent women who make their own choices which

I'm all for – birth has become another covert way of the patriarchal system trying to control women by undermining her own intuition and her innate ability to trust her body's natural process by making c-sections and epidurals appear a seductive preferable option. I would like to clarify that I am not against caesareans or judge any form of medical procedure but am highlighting a growing problem which affects the mother's experience of giving birth and why so many women are having such traumatic births, not to mention the rise in costs to the NHS which any medical procedure incurs. (Mothers can develop Post traumatic stress PTSS which is linked to a traumatic birth). While most births are described in a negative way (usually because they have been very difficult), it is not surprising that women would opt for a procedure which advertises safety, efficacy and the potential absence of pain. We trade a medically controlled operation where we believe we are in safe hands instead of venturing into an unknown realm of unnecessary pain. Women often feel it is their right to opt for a total pain free birth by epidural and/or c-section. It is still handing over our power to an unnatural process, which poses health risks, instead of taking our bodies into our own hands and riding the storm! I think true feminism is daring to journey into this unknown realm of birth and be the mistress of our body not willingly hand it over to a system who think they know better than our own body! Our bodies were designed for this process, so it is better to get reacquainted with our precious bodies because it holds all the information we need. Let us change the self fulfilling prophecy that 'birth is a painful, nightmare experience' because that is what we will get unless we change our minds and free the way.

I think women are unconsciously and sometimes consciously afraid of actually giving birth. This has a profound effect on our body. To give birth 'naturally' one needs to enter into a 'primal' state of being. During labour, our intellectual brain (neo cortex) switches off and we drift into our primal brain or state. If this state is interrupted, it can prompt the slowing down of contractions and alarm the medical professionals. This state is usually always interrupted when presented with hospital electronic gadgets such as Electro Foetal Monitors which have had a strong link to the rise in c-sections. Also it is all very well saying women need to find themselves in this primal, dreamy, in-focussed state but we don't live in a society that allows for any time to reflect, slow down, look inside, unless one does it consciously. To sufficiently enter into this primal state is to relinquish one's self control and revel in this other world state of being. Also the mind plays a large part. If we believe birth is painful and difficult then it will be but if we only have heard horror stories then how can we possibly think it would be any different? We lead fast pace lives until the last minute and then expected to just slide into a primal state of being when labour begins. I think this is unrealistic without any previous preparations during the pregnancy (despite life in the fast lane). The benefits of a therapeutic relationship, acknowledging the emotional lives of pregnant women, spring cleaning our histories before the birth and addressing any new fears, worries or anxieties which may arise, can really help free the way and support an easier journey through pregnancy, birth and beyond.

The potential benefits are: normal birth, less medical intervention (i.e. caesareans), reduced need for drugs, shorter labour, increase in breastfeeding, reduced post natal depression, better mother and infant bonding and a more positive experience for both the mother and baby.

I think the use of art as a therapeutic form of self expression would be highly compatible with the creative process of pregnancy and birth.

Unfortunately, nowadays birth is not seen as an event which has a consequence, although there must be no blame towards the mother for any birth outcome. What is needed is to increase the support and positivity that surrounds a pregnant woman. The more women having positive experiences, who can act as beacons, will in time balance out the current fear based approach so rife in our culture.

### **The Art of Birth for Emotional Support**

The Art of Birth is a therapeutic approach which offers emotional and psychological support for pregnant women and mothers. The Art of Birth, based on the principals of art therapy, aims to provide a safe, confidential space to explore thoughts and feelings creatively. Our thoughts and feelings have a direct influence on our physical body and health so it can be helpful to release any emotions that may inhibit this natural process (i.e. deny they exist). The creative arts offer a powerful form of expression, as a tool for transformation when words may not be enough. No experience of art is necessary as it is not about technical skill but creative freedom to promote self awareness and development. Pregnancy is a profound rite of passage. The essence of child birth preparation is self discovery, so a mother can give birth in awareness, not to achieve a specific birth outcome but ideally a more pleasurable experience.

An Art of Birth group aims to:

- Explore the process of Pregnancy and Birth creatively in a safe and nurturing environment.
- Enjoy playing with different art materials (experiment with colour, line, shape, texture and symbols using paints, pencils, pastels, clay and mixed media).
- Use art as a form of expression and transformation.
- Express feelings honestly and spontaneously and work through any issues to gain greater self-knowledge.
- Dispel the myth of fear surrounding birth.
- Explore the possibility of an ecstatic birth.
- Rejoice in connecting with yourself and your baby.
- Interpret your art work to see what it can reveal to you.
- A way to meet new people and share experiences.

Individual sessions are also available for more in-depth work.

### **The Benefits of Therapeutic Art**

Therapeutic Art is especially suitable for pregnant women since it compliments the verbal side of therapy. Therapies in general are often seen as a little threatening and a place you go when you have a 'problem'. This can put some people off because we don't like to admit to having 'problems' or to feel dependent on others. On the other hand, art has the potential to access unconscious processes which can find an outlet for healing or venting by making them conscious and the very nature of its creativeness could complement the creativeness of pregnancy.

All children have the ability to draw/scribble/paint; it is only life and situations, like school (which emphasises technical skill), that interrupt this most natural form of creativity. Winnicott talks about the importance of being creative and the ability to play in order to maintain a healthy sense of self. If adults are unable to use art or be creative, it is not because art is not for ALL; it is because they have been hindered in some form during their life. When people do engage with art materials, the outcome is often very liberating.

‘..The expression of unconscious wishes and feelings, even in disguised form in a drawing, serves as a “safety valve” which provides a harmless discharge of feelings which would otherwise be “bottled up” and possibly dangerous... drawing may allow the catharsis (purging) of repressed emotions... and the suggestion ..that play provides an opportunity for the harmless expression of instinctive impulses’. (Thomas, G. V, & Silk, A. M. J, 1989).

A woman could go to an Art of Birth group, for example, to have time for herself, to be creative, explore how it feels to be a first, second, third... time mum, or a teenage or single mum, and then other issues may arise which she could take a look at whilst already having an existing container and established therapeutic relationship. She may also wish to celebrate her joys! Art therapy, as therapy or self development, therefore, may be an easier ‘way in’ to psychological exploration. Post natal groups could also be highly supportive. Art and birth have been major parts of human life since the beginning of human evolution (two examples are: Palaeolithic pregnant figures carved in stone and Frida Kahlo who used painting to express her traumatic experience of pregnancy and miscarriage). Creating art and creating a human life can be seen as parallel achievements of enormous significance to a woman. Combining them by incorporating art therapy into pregnancy would offer new scope for pregnancy to become a positive and transformative event in women’s lives. Since both pregnancy and art transcend class, poverty and culture, this project offers a potential for changing lives as well as changing childbirth.

### **My Personal Birth Experience**

I was living in Bali, Indonesia, where I was deeply moved by the way pregnancy, birth and children were treated. The spiritual connection with the ‘unseen’ world and nature allowed women to trust in the process and treat the beginning of life as sacred. As soon as the baby is born there is someone holding the child so it feels safe and attached. It felt very natural for me to be pregnant there, surrounded by support.

However, I decided to have my child in England and so my husband and I moved back when I was six months pregnant. I was met by a force field of negativity which quickly propelled me towards seeking an alternative solution. I researched a myriad of alternative possibilities from holistic therapies, therapeutic birth preparation classes, read many books and found a support network.

I joined a birth preparation class where I received support from a group and worked towards overcoming some of my newly emerged fears (especially my fear of caesareans) towards a home birth. To complement this I received some one to one sessions from a therapist who works exclusively with pregnancy and birth. In

addition to all this I painted throughout my pregnancy which gave me an amazing outlet for unconscious material.

I had the birth I dreamed of: Natural, pain free, loving and peaceful in my own home. I believe the ingredients that empowered me towards this achievement were simply art, plus therapy, plus support. I believe everyone has the same chance given all the love and support available to be empowered givers of life, not unnecessarily traumatised by a medical system, who do not really understand the meaning of natural birth.

## **Conclusion**

Nora Swan-Foster is an art therapist who works with pregnant women in the US who believes 'The active art process best suits a pregnant woman because it offers a sublimated way to experience prenatal bonding, separation through childbirth and post partum bonding... Thus, the personal imagery is used to increase self-awareness rather than remaining as unresolved anxiety that may interrupt the mother/child relationship'. It is possible 'also to actively mobilize the vivid imagery to transform the fears and conflicts into new imagery that empowers the woman as a mother' (Swan-Foster, N., 1989).

If art therapy, or emotional/psychological support, was readily available for pregnant women as something normal and part of the overall NHS care package then we might reduce the possibility of further trauma for both mother and baby. As Joan Raphael-Leff, a psychotherapist working with pregnant women worldwide states that prenatal therapy can help reduce 'the likelihood of postnatal depression and suicidal attempts, possibly preventing obstetric complications, and pre-empting the long-term effects of pathological parent-baby interactions, child abuse, and emotional neglect' (1995)!

Birth with fewer obstetric complications/interventions would be more cost effective for the NHS as interventions are currently high and increasing. Reducing psychological barriers to straightforward birth processes would save the NHS money. Positive and anxiety reducing interventions during pregnancy are likely to promote better engagement by women in ante natal care. This would greatly increase the chance of good birth to post natal outcomes such as: a much higher chance of breast feeding and good child health outcomes later. An art therapy programme thus offers important potential to reduce psychological morbidity associated with pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period. Targeted at women with the greatest needs, in particular marginalised women who have difficulties engaging with ante natal care, this programme could offer Primary Care Trusts and Local Authority Children's Services a new way of reducing infant mortality (a major UK performance target) and reducing both maternal and child emotional and behavioural problems. Ultimately, emotional support should be available to every pregnant woman.

**IT'S ALL ABOUT SUPPORT!**

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