

Fears About Pregnancy

by Deborah Issokson, Psy.D., as it appeared in [Expectant Mother's Guide to Boston, 2010](#)

Giving birth is a transformative experience for which there is no rehearsal or practice. Yet, if you grow up in a cultural environment that is infused with positive birth imagery and empowering birth stories, a culture in which young girls are included in the happenings of birth within the community, then you come to your own childbearing experience having absorbed the sights and sounds of normal birth. You spend your pregnancy preparing your hearth and home for a child, you gather the important women around you and you await your turn to birth.

In the United States, birth, for the most part, tends to be relegated in private hospital rooms. Young girls do not witness births. In fact, many people shield children from birth, believing it to be too scary, too sexual and too messy for young eyes and ears. You have probably heard women tell their birth stories in terms of statistics, highlighting the length of labor, the numbers of hours they pushed, the numbers of stitches they received and the weight of the baby. Unless you ask directly, women do not tend to share their deeper emotional and physical experience of birth. So much of the birth experience remains secret, even among female friends, rather than a shared experience wherein women help each other along.

In our media-filled culture, birth is sensationalized, dramatized and often made into an emergency, all of which can leave you feeling scared, unsure, overwhelmed, and prepared for the worst. In an attempt to master this fear, you may turn to books, classes and birth plans. You may harbor a hope that if you can just learn all there is to know, if you can just be prepared for every “what if” situation, if you can just choose the best provider and have the best epidural, then all will be manageable. Amidst all of this intellectual preparation, there can be a mind-body split whereby you come to feel disconnected, in some way, from your body and you forget that your body knows how to birth, just as your body knows how to grow your baby to fullness without needing to give it any instructions. Your body is filled with inner resources and strengths for birthing. Your job during pregnancy is to get in touch with these resources, to find your “inner birth center” and to create an environment in which you can come to rely on your body’s wisdom to birth your baby.

This is not to say you can control how your birth proceeds or how the baby responds to labor. Even the best of intentions, the most open and positive attitude and the most supportive environment cannot guarantee an easy or speedy labor and birth. But intentions, attitude and support can shape how you choose to respond to each stage of your labor and birth. You can choose to be a proactive participant in the process and you can choose to be in partnership with your provider. You can choose to meet and greet your labor and birth with curiosity and a willingness to take on the physical and emotional challenge.

There are many ways to fill your inner well of resources and create your “inner birth center” so that you feel ready and able to birth your baby. Yoga, exercise, meditation, and visualization are all tools to prepare both body and mind. A reasonable amount of reading and learning so that you are familiar with terms, the stages of labor and the process of birth can be helpful. Ask to hear positive and empowering birth stories. These can infuse you with excitement and motivation and at the same time, help you see that there is great variation within the continuum of normal, healthy birth. If you cannot find anyone willing to share her story, go online or find a book of birth stories. Choose a birthing class that fosters empowerment and trust in the body as well as positive birth images. Consider a series of classes rather than a one time intensive class; a series has the benefit of building confidence over time and allows you to integrate the information and the experience over several weeks. It also affords you the opportunity to meet other birthing families.

Hiring a doula is another way to provide yourself with an extra layer of support and comfort during birth. A doula relieves your birth partner of having to be an “expert” in birth and can allow him/her to simply love you through the birth process. The doula can be the technical support person, familiar with birth, available to support not only you, but your birth partner as well and can be an advocate for you within the medical environment. If finances are an obstacle, look for a doula in training. They are eager to attend births in order to receive certification and will often charge little to nothing for their service.

There are times when your fears and concerns about giving birth may be related to personal history, family history, disability, mental health challenges, or extenuating circumstances. In these instances, it can be beneficial to find a mental health counselor who specializes in reproductive health issues. Sometimes unresolved emotional issues can be an obstacle in the birthing process. Supportive psychotherapy can help you sort through your fears and concerns and help clear the way for you to have a positive and less frightening birth experience.

Finally, remember that there is more than one way to give birth and more than one kind of positive birth experience. Even though the physiological process of giving birth is universal, the personal meaning you make of the birth experience will be unique.