

Birth Fears

By Lauren Mishcon

Farts were always funny in my household. Much to my mother's irritation, my dad, brother and I took great delight in all toilet-based humour. This dubious tradition has carried on into my own home with my husband and our two sons under five all enjoying anything rude and fortunately this has stood me in good stead in my role as a Birth Doula.

Birth is not glamorous. It does not resemble in any way the TV and movie portrayal of a glowing woman lying on a bed, giving a few delicate pushes and receiving into her arms a sparkling clean pink and perfect baby. Birth is messy, primal, animalistic and very 'real'. For me, this is part of the reason why I love being a doula. I am not involved in crunching numbers or marketing strategies. I do not spend days in a tidy office worrying about 'blue sky thinking' and sales figures. I am instead frequently vomited on, have my shoes covered in a sudden gush of amniotic fluid, am blood spattered, or covered in tar like baby poo. I am clung to by sweaty, heavily breathing women for hours at a time. But I am living each minute of my job; I become engrossed in life's most amazing journey -the everyday miracle that is the birth of a baby. And I am privileged to be a part of it.

I see women at their most vulnerable. Naked and sometimes frightened and in pain. I try to help them through their labour using my knowledge, my skills and my empathy as a woman who has been there and done it. Twice! There is no place during birth for shyness, modesty or for social niceties. The sanitisation that we in the West are so used to in our general day-to-day life is stripped away and you are left with only the primal situation that faces you. One of the things that has stayed with me since giving birth is the pure memory of feeling so alive in those hours labouring, waiting and working towards meeting my baby. It is rare in life that we are forced to live entirely in the moment and it can be wonderful.

Because of our social conditioning mums-to-be often have worries that they are too embarrassed to share with anyone. What I call their 'Things'. I always ask at my meetings

"Is there anything in particular that is worrying you about giving birth?" It is usually one or a combination of Tearing, Pooing and Swearing. Some women are too polite to feel they can even bring it up and are genuinely relieved and comforted that someone is willing to talk to them honestly about it and answer their questions without feeling embarrassed.

It is impossible to explain to a woman who has never laboured that in the moment all these things will not matter and they will not care. But unvoiced fears even ones on a subconscious level can hold a woman back and be counter-

productive to the labouring process. I like to tell the truth in a pragmatic and unembarrassed way to all my clients in the hope that they will be able to release the fear in advance of the birth and to know that they have no need to feel ashamed.

To be able to say to a woman in fear that it is more than likely that if there is anything in their bowel then it will inevitably be forced out during the latter stages of labour. They will probably not even notice it happening. It will be whisked away by a midwife within seconds and most importantly, we are all jolly pleased to see some poo as it is a great sign that labour is progressing well and they are pushing in the right direction!

To tell them that we will do all we can to prevent tearing with a combination of teaching them about perinael massage, by delivering in a good position and ensuring that a skilled midwife gives the vagina and perineum every chance to stretch slowly. To reassure them that if they do tear then the repairs are simple and because of such a good blood supply to the area the healing time is quick and the stitches dissolvable.

To let them know that all the noises they feel like making are ok and actually good to let out. That her primal roar is a wonderful sound, not something to feel that she has to hold back. A woman should be able to verbally express herself freely throughout the birth and to know that those around her will not judge her.

All of these things need to be discussed with a woman who feels repressed and it can be powerful when she allows herself the freedom to release herself from the constricts of how she has always been told to behave.

A case in point: I had a lovely first time mum who told me she was quite shy. She was hoping for a hospital water birth and we had a few discussions during her pregnancy about what 'outfit' she was planning to wear for labour as she was concerned about her modesty and also how she would conduct herself once she was in labour. She decided to wear a black tank-tini, which she bought specially. I smiled when I saw it, complimented it and then reminded her that she may need to take the bottoms off at some point to get the baby out.

The only woman I have ever know to achieve a birth whilst remaining fully clothed was Daphne from Neighbours in the early 1990's who had her son by the pond outside Lassiter's Hotel in a pair of denim dungarees.

When the time came for this lady to deliver I arrived at her house at 3am. She was in her bedroom naked and sweating and throwing up last nights curry into a bucket that I was holding. By mid morning we had done many trips to the loo during which she had happily invited me to look at her bloody show, she had been in & out the bath and we had cooked and eaten some breakfast. At 11am she turned to me and said,

"Oh, I hope you don't mind that I'm naked. I just feel better like this"

I laughed, and told her that I wasn't exactly expecting her to be labouring in a ballgown! Her inhibitions had been shed the moment she began her journey towards birthing her baby and it was a joy to behold. She let go and listened to her body and what it instinctively told her to do with no worry for how she looked to anyone observing. When the time came to go into hospital it was almost impossible to get this 'shy' girl into come clothes. I managed to wrestle some knickers, a robe and some socks onto her.

Wonderfully, she was already fully dilated to 10cm when we arrived and she immediately stripped, got into the birth pool and began pushing fantastically on a birthing stool, which we had put into the water. The lights were dimmed, her husband, the midwife and I were all silent and sitting by the side of the pool calmly witnessing this birth unfold. With an almighty push came a little poo that none of us noticed until she spotted it and piped up "uh-oh – a floater!" It was hard not to laugh especially as the atmosphere in the room had been up until this point reverential and almost holy in its silence but we did chuckle and the midwife fetched a sieve that is just for the purpose and we simply carried on until her gorgeous baby boy was born not long afterwards.

Midwives and doulas live and work in a world where inhibitions do not exist. There is nothing we have not seen or heard before and it is not possible to shock us. Your partners may be surprised to see and hear you behave as you never have done before but they will cope and they will still love you and accept whatever happens during the rollercoaster ride of birth just as you would do if it were them. If you can voice your anxieties and go into your labour feeling free to express yourself then that's another step towards achieving a positive empowering birth experience.

Just remember as with Las Vegas. What happens in the Delivery Room STAYS in the delivery room!

Lauren Mishcon is a Recognised Doula UK Birth Doula. She lives in North London with her husband and two young sons. She divides her time between Jimmy Choo and her purple rubber Crocs which she has found are a little more practical for attending births.

Organisations: Doula UK – www.doula.org.uk
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