

# Special Considerations for Survivors of Sexual Violence

STRAIGHT TALK ON BUILDING A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE BIRTH EXPERIENCE



**We know that 1 in 4 women will have experienced some form of sexual violence by the time they reach adulthood.** We also know that as many pregnancies are the result of sexual assault as are the result of consensual sex, and that anywhere from 30% to 90% of rape-related pregnancies are brought to term. Sometimes, historical sexual trauma, even when fully “resolved”, can be re-triggered during pregnancy and the birth experience. If you are a survivor of sexual violence, you may find the information below to be helpful.

**You are not alone and there are strategies that can help you to practice self-compassion and self-care during and after your pregnancy and birth.** For survivors of sexual violence, it is important to maximize choice, agency, and control over your body, your experience, and your care. While it can be difficult to communicate your feelings, needs, and wants, planning around these will help you to create a more ideal experience for yourself and your baby.

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## Normalizing and Honouring Your Trauma-Related Reactions

**You may not recognize your very normal reactions to past trauma as they surface during pregnancy and birth.** It is important to honour your body’s messages and to understand why it might react with fear, discomfort, panic, and anxiety. Sometimes, just recognizing that our bodies are responding to past experience can help us honour and respond to our needs with self-compassion.

**Self-compassion involves non-judgment of yourself and your needs,** offering yourself encouragement and positive regard, and allowing yourself to understand and accept that your fears, worries, and negative emotions are just one legitimate part of your pregnancy and birth experience. There is nothing wrong with you! And it is not your fault that you are having these reactions - even women who have not survived sexual violence can experience these emotions and sensations. Below are some examples of situations and events that might cause trauma-related reactions:

- Medical exams that are experienced as invasive, uncomfortable, or painful
- Changes in the body that contribute to a feeling of loss of control
- Experiences with medical professionals (and others) that result in a feeling of powerlessness or lack of choice
- The presumption of others about touching your body or comments related to your pregnancy that cross your boundaries
- A heightened sense of vulnerability as mobility is reduced
- Pain or discomfort in parts of the body that remind you of your assault or abuse
- Birth itself can recreate similar conditions associated with sexual violence - your physical sensations and emotions during the birth may trigger trauma-related responses
- Feelings of shame and guilt related to a difficult pregnancy or birth experience can trigger past experiences of shame and guilt related to sexual violence

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## Planning Ahead and Preparing Supports

**Feeling safe with your sensations and emotions is something that can be practiced alone and with others.** Guided meditations, mindfulness practice, and talking to trusted others can help you recognize, validate, and accept challenging feelings and sensations, knowing that they are normal, valid, and will pass and/or change in time

**Self-soothing involves recognizing difficult emotions and sensations and finding ways to create more helpful sensations in the body** - taking a warm bath, listening to soothing music, watching your favourite comedy show, reading a great book, talking to a friend, going for a walk, colouring or dancing, or any activity that you know brings you peace and joy.

**Self-care is a proactive project that involves taking time every day to do things that create positive emotions and sensations.** The possibilities are as unique and varied as you are.

## Supportive Partners, Friends, and Family

**As much as is possible for you, communicate your fears and worries, as well as your everyday experiences with a supportive partner,** close friends, and understanding family. If you do not have someone to talk to, speak to a trusted professional such as a counsellor, doctor, doula, spiritual advisor, or body-work specialist.

## Making Your Wishes Known

**Developing a birth plan and making choices about pain management are just some of the decisions that can be made ahead of time.** Your body belongs to you, and you have the right to make decisions about what happens to your body. Many survivors find that it is important to remain in control as much as is possible. Remember that you have the right to choose your medical team according to what feels good to you. You have the right to decide where you will give birth (hospital, birth centre, at home), and who you wish to have present during that time (just because others may want to be there doesn't mean they have the right to!). Discuss all your options and any fears or concerns with people you trust and who will listen. It may also be a good idea to write down any of your wishes or concerns so that you can better remember them when consulting with your medical team.

## Connecting with Your Baby While Attending to Your Needs

**As a survivor of sexual violence, you may find that pregnancy and birth take a larger toll on your body and your emotions, especially as you navigate any trauma-related responses.** It's important to enlist the support of your partner, your friends, and/or your family in helping you through this time. You do not have to do it all alone, and you are not solely responsible for all your baby's needs - make use of any and all the resources at your disposal. Take time for yourself by establishing a solid self-care routine. Your emotional health is really important so that you can be your best self while developing a healthy attachment with your baby. If you feel that you are struggling, do not hesitate to get professional help. You have a right to care, compassion, and support.