AIMS For a better birth...

Guilty

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By Helen Ward Leese



Helen with baby Amara

A theme I've noticed since giving birth myself, and surrounding myself with other mothers, is 'guilt'. So many births (including my own) don't go to plan, and there are so many contributing factors in this- but what do so many new mums feel?

Guilt.

I am now 9 months postpartum, my daughter is thriving, but I haven't yet managed to move on from how my birthing experience played out.

To step back and contextualise; I knew what type of birth I wanted and I didn't get it.

Not even close.

I had had a low risk pregnancy, and for all intents and purposes, there was no reason why I shouldn't have a low risk labour. I had arranged to give birth at a local NHS birthing centre, and although I absolutely recognise that labour can go down many paths; I had not, in any way, anticipated what actually did happen.

I had for many years been warned about 'the system' over-medicalising birth (treating us like we are an unwell patient, as opposed to a person doing the most natural thing on the planet), and I took NCT and hypnobirthing classes to make sure I was as informed as possible, enabling me to make the best decisions

for myself and my baby. I was prepared for all eventualities (or so I thought) and I felt truly calm and collected when I thought about going into labour.

I loved the idea that the birthing centre was midwife-led, that they encourage you to listen to your instincts, that you can give birth in a birthing pool (should you choose to), and you might even say I was 'looking forward' to the experience!

When my waters broke, in bed at 3.00am, I calmly woke my husband and told him I was in labour. I spent the first 12 hours of my labour in my home. Just me, my husband, and bump.

Were the contractions agony? Absolutely. I won't pretend it didn't hurt. But did I feel calm, in control, prepared, ready? - Yes.

My husband rubbed my back, kept me hydrated and helped me with my breathing exercises. My labour progressed exactly as expected and my contractions became more and more frequent.

Once it was time to head to the birthing centre, my husband called to let them know we were on the way (having also informed them when I went into labour 12 hours before).

"Oh sorry, we are understaffed so the birthing centre has closed. She'll have to give birth in the hospital next door."

I tried to stay calm. It wasn't my plan, but I knew the worst thing for myself and my baby was for me to panic.

We headed to the labour ward at the hospital, and that's where everything changed.

There was no room for me, bright lights, loud noises, no doctor available to see me, no midwives free to help, nowhere for me to go.

We sat in a corridor whilst my contractions got worse, with my husband asking if there was somewhere we could go to give birth. Eventually we were put into a holding room; "Just stay in here for a while until we can find somewhere for you to go."

My contractions slowed.

I had learnt what this meant and I knew that my rising panic (and the hormones that said panic releases) was going to halt the labour process. I was in agony, but I could feel she had stopped coming down.

I worked on my breathing, but I could already feel myself losing control of my birth, and I was worried.

Eventually they found us a room. Doctors and nurses immediately put me onto my back, with my legs in stirrups, to examine me internally. I told them “I don’t mind being examined now, but if we can keep them to a minimum that would be good, and I really don’t want to push lying on my back.” I was told that they’ll ‘need’ to examine me multiple times throughout the push process to check on the baby, and a heart monitor was quickly strapped around my stomach.

To cut a long (33 hour labour) story short- I was stuck in that room, fighting to have some control, for over 10 hours.

I was continuously flipped onto my back by medical staff, examined internally during contractions, told I couldn't push whilst kneeling on all fours or standing (“we won't be able to check her heart in those positions and that's dangerous”) and I felt truly violated.

My husband said firmly to the staff "she can’t push on her back, why can't she push kneeling up, if that's what feels right?"

He was told that it was dangerous for his child if they couldn't hear her heart. What parent can argue with that? Of course, our daughter comes first. Of course, we will believe what we're told by the supposed experts.

And so of course - I complied.

Eventually, a surgeon came in and said I'd been in labour for ‘too long' and that myself and my baby were 'getting tired' and she offered me a caesarean section. I refused.

(Of course I recognise this can be the right thing for some women. But it wasn't for me.)

The surgeon then explained to me that the safest thing for my baby was for her to pull her out with forceps. She said that the baby seemed ‘a bit stuck’ and it was best to cut into me (an episiotomy) and to pull my daughter out.

I conceded.

I was 30 hours into labour. I felt powerless. I felt defeated. I felt like I had let my baby down. And if I'm being blunt- I just wanted her out.

The forceps delivery was relatively quick. I had an epidural (having had no pain relief for the duration of labour so far) and they pulled her out. Even after she came out, I remained feeling out of control. They took her off to the other side of the room and I said “please give her to me!”

Eventually I held her on my chest and I sobbed.

I instantly loved her more than anything I had ever loved, but I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with guilt.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

I won't bore you with my current postpartum issues, but unfortunately my forcep delivery has done some serious damage. In addition to initial problems following the birth (including haemorrhaging and needing multiple blood transfusions), I had some long lasting damage to my internal organs that I am still receiving treatment for.

My daughter is happy and well, and I couldn't be more grateful for that.

Everyone tells you 'Well, at least your baby is healthy.' She is. I'm so lucky. And I wish that was enough to dissolve my feelings of pain and trauma, and of being violated… but it isn't.

At the moment those feelings are something I am still tackling every day.

So why is 'guilt' my primary emotion?

Well, I consented.

That's what I keep going over and over in my head.

I should have said no. I should have refused forceps. Maybe I should have had a home birth. I should have refused having so many examinations during labour.

I can't pretend I didn't say 'okay' to the 10th, 11th, 12th internal examination during my contractions. Because I did.

I struggle with the fact that I 'let things happen' in the way that they did.

But what I am now (after many months) able to recognise too; is that if you tell a vulnerable woman who's in agony, who's attempting to birth her baby safely, who's trying to navigate her labour in a completely unnatural birthing environment with doctors shouting at her, that she 'needs to do something for her baby'- she's going to do it.

And do you know what's shocking?- it turns out there was no actual risk to my baby. Or to me. Her heartbeat was fine. My body was fine. All of my birthing medical notes say it. And the use of forceps was 'precautionary.' Had my labour slowed down? - of course it had! Nature knows what it's doing, and it didn't think I was safe (I was giving birth in a busy corridor for goodness sake!).

But my baby was fine, and so was I.

What I needed was support in breathing right, support in pushing in the positions that felt right instinctively, support in staying calm.

What did I receive instead? They pulled her out as though that was my only option.

I want to be clear that I love the NHS. I LOVE that in theory we have a system that provides care for

anyone who needs it. But I also see that severe underfunding (and thus, understaffing) is leaving us with an 'in and out' system for labour. Get the mother in, deliver the baby as swiftly as possible, discharge them and 'onto the next.'

(And of course, a system devised many years ago by men, for birthing women, is a factor too).

As it stands - I don't think we're getting it right. And recently meeting so many other mothers in similar positions has confirmed that.

For me, 9 months into my postpartum journey, I am still not healed. Mentally or physically. Despite being previously fit and healthy and having a low risk pregnancy, I am still suffering with a plethora of medical problems.

I also don't know if I could ever go through with having another child.

I recently received some trauma support from one of the team at AIMS, and the first thing she said after I sat sobbing, telling her about how I had failed in labour, how I had made stupid decisions that have left me with permanent damage, how guilty I feel about bringing my wonderful daughter into a panicked, stressful environment…

"I'm so sorry that happened to you. It's not your fault."

Author Bio: Following an accomplished career as a vocalist/performer (Helen Hart), Helen is about to return after maternity leave to being Head of Client Services with a company serving large charities. She's the oldest of 8 siblings in a blended family and was born at home.