AIMS For a better birth...

Breastfeeding trauma

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By Nicola De Sousa

Breastfeeding trauma is something I never thought about or knew about. I never even thought about breastfeeding until I was pregnant and then thought - it helps you lose the baby weight so I'll give it a go. That was until I reconnected with my old uni friend Lizzie and she sent me some books on birth and breastfeeding. She was a huge advocate for breastfeeding after facing feeding trauma with her daughter and she opened my eyes to so much about birth and breastfeeding that I had no clue about.

I came from a family with little to no breastfeeding experience. Two generations on my side and also on my husband's side had formula fed. So that knowledge and expertise handed down from woman to woman had long been lost.

When I went into preterm labour at 35 weeks, I hadn't expressed any colostrum yet as it was still too early. I had written a birth plan, but not a feeding plan of any description. Something that could have saved me a lot of trauma and grief, in hindsight.

That day, I was up early to walk the dogs before work as usual and I remember getting absolutely

drenched in very unexpected rain and having to come home and get completely changed and blow dry my hair. I remember going to the toilet, and when I stood up, I noticed 2 drips, one down each leg. I thought I'd just mis-wiped or put it down to some sort of pregnancy discharge.

I'm a secondary school teacher and we were in the middle of an inspection. It was day 3/3 and I hadn't been observed yet, so I knew one of my two A-Level lessons that day was going to be seen.

I was in the staffroom talking to a colleague about a bit of lower back ache I was having, when she said she could see my stomach contracting through my dress and she thought I was in labour. I just laughed and told her I couldn't feel anything and it was too soon anyway. The next thing was, she'd called the school first aider who took one look at me and told me if I didn't get in her car to go to hospital, then she would call an ambulance and that would cause a scene in front of all the students.

I was adamant I was staying to do my lessons and contribute to the inspection, but in the end I was coerced into the car and took my laptop and a massive bag of marking with me as I was so convinced this was a complete waste of time.

Turns out I was indeed in active labour and had premature rupture of membranes (PROM). My cervix was fully effaced and already dilated to 4cm without me having any signs at all, and because I was only 35 weeks and 1 day, I was asked to stay in hospital to be monitored and to be given steroids and antibiotics to protect the baby. I was told I would be induced the following day if my labour stalled, which it did. Pretty much as soon as they told me I was in labour, my labour stopped.

To cut a long story short, I was induced the following afternoon. Our daughter was positioned back to back and I was forced to stay on my back on the bed, even when I was in agony. I only had gas and air - the labour was so fast there wouldn't have been time for anything else even if I'd wanted it! When our daughter was born, I remember seeing these big, brown eyes looking at me, reaching down and touching her little body, telling her I was there and hearing her cry…then she was gone. They whisked her away to be checked - no delayed chord clamping, no skin-to-skin, no golden hour. No time to bond. I was left in the bed shaking and I screamed at my husband to go with her when they took her out of the room.

He came back to get me as soon as she was deemed stable (she didn't need any breathing support) and was in an incubator. He wheeled me into the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). I will never forget the realisation that I didn't know which baby was mine. I am haunted by that. I didn't get long enough to look at her to recognise her.

Even writing this makes me cry. She was lying there crying in the incubator. She was born, snatched from her mummy and put in a box. I wasn't even 'allowed' to try and breastfeed her. Now I just can't imagine how I accepted that - surely it would have been an overwhelming instinct? It wasn't. And I still feel guilty about that. I was only 'allowed' to hold her for a minute and then I was sent back to the ward. She was tube fed formula because the nurse said, "She's an early baby and she won't even have the sucking reflex".

I sobbed on the ward amongst all these mums with their babies. My husband was unceremoniously

ejected at 5am even though he'd be allowed back at 7am to visit.

I'm sure now you can already see why I joined Make Birth Better.

Here is where the real trauma started though.

The following day I was 'allowed' to try and breastfeed my own daughter. She latched perfectly the very first time. I had no idea what I was doing but I was incredibly lucky it was so natural and easy for us. The nurses were amazed and said, "Are you sure you got your gestation correct?" The bond between us then was suddenly activated - the love just took me over and seeing her feeding and getting so much comfort in my arms just overwhelmed me. From then on I didn't miss a single feed or nappy change. I lived on the ward for 12 days and was woken by the nurses through the night and sat with her skin to skin next to the incubator all day every day.

The only thing that was going 'to plan' and that I felt some control over, was breastfeeding. I'd even stocked a mini milk bank in the freezer as I'd been pumping to build up my supply. Everything else was beyond my control, but the feeding - that was my job and I was doing it really well. 'Good Girl Syndrome' strikes again.

One day, my daughter pulled her feeding tube out and the nurses decided that they wouldn't put it back in as we had now established breastfeeding and I wasn't leaving the hospital. She instantly looked like a more 'well' baby and psychologically, I felt like we were one step closer to going home. A couple of days later, I'd just put her back in her incubator after a feed and lots of skin-to-skin and went back to the ward for a shower. I was probably gone for 15 minutes.

When I walked back in, everyone on the desk in NICU looked very sheepish.

I asked if she'd woken up and one of the nurses said, "Not exactly".

Why were they sheepish? Well, one nurse had come back from annual leave and hadn't read our notes. She'd just seen my daughter with no feeding tube in and taken it upon herself to put a feeding tube back in - no consent from parents, no questions asked about why there wasn't a feeding tube and with nobody there to hold her while they did it.

Not only that. She had given her formula through the tube despite the 30 plus bottles of my breastmilk that were in the fridge and freezer.

When I was told this, I had what can only be described as a mental 'break'. I literally felt myself 'snap' in my brain. I started sobbing, hyperventilating, screaming, pacing. I think writing this is actually the first time I've acknowledged just how horrific this was and the level of trauma they inflicted on us. How was this allowed to happen? I now know this was an assault on my baby.

I was so distressed that they had to get my husband to come immediately to try and calm me down.

The final blow when I look back, was being gaslighted by the nurse responsible who told me, "I was only

doing what was best for the baby" - completely invalidating my reaction.

My mental health went downhill from there and I don't think I've ever been the same since, actually.

I developed severe anxiety and what I now know to be PTSD. I did not have my trauma understood or validated by people around me and I didn't really even validate it myself because 'we were both ok'. I tried to keep it all under control but anxiety about my daughter's health, about germs, about people holding her for extended periods of time and about the prospect of going back to work and leaving her with strangers - it eventually took its toll. And after one particular visit when someone wouldn't give her back to me when I asked, I felt another mental break. I felt like nobody could hear what I was saying and nobody understood how I was feeling and like I was screaming but nothing was coming out. Everyone just thought I was overreacting, and told me so. I felt sheer panic and an overwhelming loneliness. And the next morning when I woke up, the whole left side of my face had gone into spasm.

I had what's called a hemifacial spasm, brought on by acute stress and anxiety. The stress was so great that it had caused the blood vessels to my brain to contract and they had put pressure on my facial nerves.

The whole left side of my face was pulled up into a tight grimace, which made the other side look droopy and paralyzed. If I got stressed it would pull tighter and tighter. I thought initially, when I saw myself in the mirror, that I'd had a stroke. Three different doctors told me what it was but I didn't believe them.

I didn't get better over time. And I don't believe I would have recovered on my own. I asked for help from my GP who said waiting lists were so long that there was no point referring me for counselling.

I got some free talking therapy, but talking about it all wasn't helping. It was just like reliving it every time. It wasn't curing my extreme responses to things and my inability to remember what happened without having a traumatic episode.

One day my husband bumped into a friend whose wife was a psychotherapist. He must have told him I wasn't well and that he was struggling, because his friend suggested I go and see her. He said she would understand. Eventually I paid to go and see her. Thankfully I could just about afford to while on maternity leave, because she cured me as much as I'm likely to be cured, I think. In only 2 sessions. And she also released a vast backlog of other traumas from my past.

I've shared this story to offer validation to any other women who may have experienced something feeding-related that has caused a similar impact on their mental health. I want to make it clear that this is a biologically normal response for us. And this is not restricted to breastfeeding. I have met several women who have experienced trauma when they made the decision to formula feed, but didn't expect to feel utter grief and distress when other family members then started giving bottles. That was incredibly traumatic for them and again, was a response that was unexpected and totally invalidated by others around them.

My experiences led me to train as a Breastfeeding Counsellor and Infant Feeding Coach. Intensive

training that I completed in the evenings online for 2 hours a week, submitted several pieces of coursework and then sat a formal exam. All while being back at work. But doing this training was part of my recovery when I look back, and the work I'm doing now, to support women in their feeding journeys, literally lights up my soul and continues to heal me.

What I'm realising is how much feeding trauma is out there. I've even spoken to men who have feeding trauma because they thought they were 'helping' their partners by supplementing with bottles. But for the women, it felt that their partner didn't believe in their ability to breastfeed and this breach of trust has affected their relationship negatively - for decades.

Having had my second baby, my son, just 6 weeks ago (he was born with a tongue tie), I have also realised why there is so much feeding trauma and why so many women have what they see as unsuccessful feeding journeys, or end up stopping earlier than they want to. We do not have sufficient antenatal education about breastfeeding and we do not have the continuity of care after birth with regards to breastfeeding support. This means that small niggles or problems are missed and go on to become bigger problems very quickly.

Women don't know how to protect their supply in the early days if there are issues and then end up with a narrative such as, "I didn't make enough milk so we had to put the baby on formula". It seems to always end up with mothers believing they have failed in some way.

We also aren't educated or properly informed about how our choices around the birth of our babies can have a huge impact on breastfeeding. For example, many drugs we are offered in labour cross the placenta and can mean a very sleepy baby - one who doesn't really want to feed much or who gets tired quickly. They therefore don't kick start the 'supply and demand' needed for a robust milk supply. They may not put on weight like they need to and, because the breast isn't being adequately emptied, mum may end up with mastitis. Despite all this not having anything to do with mum, it seems it's always mum who is 'blamed'. And breastfeeding not going the way they wanted can be absolutely devastating for those women who feel a deep NEED to feed their baby.

I would love for all women to be fully educated in all forms of feeding before having their babies, and also be aware that their birth plan should reflect their feeding plan (and yes, they should most definitely have both birth and feeding plans). I would also love to see feeding trauma being recognised and treated in its own right, as birth trauma now is.

If you have been upset or traumatised by how your baby was or wasn't fed, this is normal and you deserve to be validated and supported. It is not 'just' how you feed your baby. For a mother it is much deeper and much more emotive than that. It is grounded in hormones and in instincts, and we as a society need to be much more sensitive to that.

Author Bio: Nicola is an Infant feeding coach in Jersey. Find her on instagramhere.