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Book Reviews

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- Emotional Recovery by Lynn Madsen; reviewed by Susan Merrick

Emotional Recovery by Lynn Madsen

Bergin and Garvey
ISBN-13: 0897893484
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£15.95

Reviewed by
Susan Merrick

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I found this book so emotionally empowering that I wanted to shout about the capacity it has for helping to heal. The only way to explain this is to review it in relation to how it has helped me. Madsen begins in the best way possible for showing empathy and understanding fortrauma in birth, by telling her own story. As someone who experienced a necessary and life saving emergency caesarean section and then a healing vaginal birth, as a reader you know instantly that she understands the full range of emotions that can come with childbirth. The extent of this I feel is clearly portrayed in the following excerpt from her birth story.

'"I'm very sorry your expectations didn't get met", Expectations! Beyond expectations, I landed on another planet. I am only grateful to be alive because Evan is alive. I know the future holds this child who was born precipitously and that is good. But the present is horrible. The present still holds tubes and catheters, difficulties walking across the room, an inability to care for my own baby. The midwife asks if I've cried at all. I say I haven't because it hurts too much. She thinks I mean too emotionally painful. I mean too physically painful. I want to cry, but my belly screams out with any sob, so I smotherthem. Too much pain. Don't touch my stomach!'

To some, this may seem an extreme response. For me it started to unlock the flood gates. On reading her birth stories and hearing her own pain, I allowed myself to rememberthe pain, physical and emotional.

Not only is Madsen a mother who has had a VBAC but she is also a psychotherapist. On experiencing her own birth traumas she sought out literature to explain, and support her healing process, only to find that there was none. So she wrote this book.

The book is set out, afterthe birth stories, into separate chapters dealing with separate elements of childbirth and early motherhood, how it can affect you and how you can begin to heal. Two other women's birth stories are shared also, in orderto give a comparative account of how different experiences can be traumatic in different ways, but follow similar patterns and need the same amount of attention. Each chapter ends with a few reflective questions and these questions are aimed at starting your own process of awareness of your own trauma, and subsequently how to process it.

Madsen begins by describing definitions and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In doing this she shows how her own and the other women's' stories showed many of the symptoms that would result in a diagnosis of PTSD for each of them. For me I found this chapter illuminating. She described how recognising that an experience has had elements of trauma, and recognising that we have had specific responses to that trauma is the first part of healing. I instantly thought, 'oh well this part does not relate to my experience, it was not traumatic enough'. Then I began to read some of the symptoms, and some of them just jumped out at me! I will not list them all, only the ones I have realised describe my 'responses' exactly.

Recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event - I still have this almost three years on. My Sister in Law gave birth yesterday and my thoughts before bed went straight back to the build up to my own EMCS, even though I have had a wonderful VBAC since.

Intense psychological distress at exposure to events that symbolise or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event including anniversaries - I know of many women who experience extreme distress on the anniversaries of their traumatic birth experiences, on their children's birthdays.

For me, I have not noticed any response to the anniversary but I have had some startlingly strong responses to other exposure. Reading or hearing birth stories of first time mothers who have positive experiences, watching caesarean sections on the TV and if I am being totally honest, writing the word caesarean. For a long time I have used the phrase 'section' as I found this easierto tolerate than the word caesarean. Looking clearly at it now it is definitely a response to my own experience.