AIMS For a better birth...

Anxious in a pandemic

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By Louisa Powell

My name is Louisa, I am 29 years old and a mother to two girls aged 9 and 6. I am a part-time teaching assistant and a full-time student, currently in the last year of my studies. As I write this, I am 35 weeks and 6 days pregnant and we are in our 4th week of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic!

I remember first hearing about the pandemic in January, although it didn't seem much of a concern for me then. Around about the same time, I had been signed off from work with pregnancy-related anxiety. My anxieties were based around something bad happening to my baby and my children. My midwives were amazing and recommended that I see them every two weeks to put my worries to rest.

The week beginning the 9th of March I was becoming increasingly worried about how this virus would affect my family and my pregnancy. My mum helps a lot with childcare and we are incredibly close. She is my rock and the main person I would go to when my anxieties were taking over in my head. My mum is also classed as one of the 'extremely vulnerable'.

On the 18th of March I had my last routine appointment in the community hospital with my midwife. This was different to others and the feeling in the hospital was quite eerie. However, my midwife was as happy as ever and I felt relaxed once in her company. We discussed my anxieties and, as ever, she was so reassuring. We agreed that my next visit would be the 15th of April and that would be at my home for my homebirth suitability visit.

As news developed and the virus spread increased, so did my anxieties. I could no longer see my mum as both she and I were isolating. My homebirth plans seemed like they would be ruined; all I kept hearing was how homebirths around the UK were being cancelled. I desperately wanted my nan to be present at the birth; however, that was no longer an option due to her having to isolate. My children were no longer at school and we were isolated in the house. Only my partner would leave for shopping and work. It made me jealous. I have always been so independent and I felt like my life has been stripped away and I had to rely on him for everything. As the country was on a 'lockdown' and I was pregnant, I felt I could not do anything for my family. I had no answers for my children nor myself. I felt incredibly low. This was not how I wanted my pregnancy to be. I felt scared, trapped and alone.

Two days prior to the 6th of April I had noticed a change in my baby's movements. They were not following her usual pattern. On the 6th I reluctantly rang the midwifery unit to notify them. I was advised to go in. I also had a cough (hay fever related but understandably precautions had to be taken). Due to this I could not go to the midwife-led unit but instead had to go to a main hospital. I think it was on this day that I really felt the effects of how this virus was impacting our lives even though we were not infected. I had no-one to have my children. My mum was usually on hand, but most of all I'd have to do this alone. I was potentially facing the prospect of bad news and I could not take my partner with me; suddenly I didn't want my independence back anymore. My brain was screaming at me not to go. We had been so strictly isolating and now I was considering going into a hospital with infectious people in there. In that moment I felt like I was choosing between my baby's life and that of my family. I did not want to go but, as advised, I did. I was angry at the midwives who were urging me to be seen, even though deep down I knew it was for the best.

Once I arrived at the hospital, I rang to say I was outside and a midwife met me in full PPE and handed me a mask. I was very scared. But once again the midwife, who I had not met before, was lovely. Had it not been for the PPE then I would not have known any different. I was in awe at how she did her job. How comfortable she made me, how she reassured me even though in their eyes I was a potential risk due to my cough. My baby was fine and, after being hooked up to the monitors and she was kicking away, we were sent home. I cannot stress enough how good the care was at that appointment. Again, it was a very scary experience, but the midwife treated it no differently to any other routine appointment. As an expectant mother with anxieties, I couldn't ask for anything more.

On the 15th of April I had my homebirth visit. I had been planning a homebirth since I found out I was pregnant. Even though my original plans can no longer happen, I want a homebirth now more than ever. My midwife arrived all kitted up with her PPE. I felt sad for her that she has to go about like that. It must

be incredibly uncomfortable to spend your whole day like that. But once again, I wouldn't have known there was a global pandemic going on and she ensured that I was happy, reassured and comfortable. I was made aware that whilst homebirths at present are still going ahead, that can change. However, I am ok with that. I understand and I want what's best and safest for us all, midwives included!

To sum up my experience with pregnancy and the Covid-19 pandemic so far, I would say it is scary; I am experiencing a type of fear that I have never felt before. The unknown is overwhelming. However, each time I have been in the care of the midwives they take my worries and concerns away, even though they must be feeling fear themselves. They have calmed and reassured me, making things feel 'normal'. I understand I cannot have things the way I originally planned and indeed that does hurt, but the midwives have done their utmost in making sure my pregnancy and birth plans can be followed as closely and as safely as possible. The fears of the virus cannot be taken away, but my midwives have certainly soothed them.