



## 7 Self help techniques for survivors

Survivors of abuse deserve special care and attention during pregnancy, birth and postpartum. One benefit of midwifery care is the deep connection and support that the midwife provides for her client. The midwife is focused on helping her client through the childbearing year and has many tools to offer. One such tool is to help the mother learn and understand several self-help methods for the mother to use in times of panic, anxiety, stress, or anger. Many, if not all, survivors experience feelings and coping techniques that they have accessed for survival. These may present at times that are not inherently dangerous to the mother or baby, but are triggered by certain events or thoughts. It is our goal to provide our strong survivor moms with 7 Self-Help tools to prevent distress and/or manage distress. Becoming familiar with these techniques and practicing them before your labor and birth may help you prepare for feelings and emotions that often present during child birth. All of these techniques are found in Chapter 9 of When Survivors Give Birth, by Penny Simkin and Phyllis Klaus. We encourage you to check out this book from our lending library. Please reach out to us with any questions. We are happy to help you master these techniques and guide you as you learn more about yourself and your birth journey.

When you feel or recognize that familiar, strong reaction inside yourself - those physical and emotional reactions – try using one of these strategies that you have practiced:

### 1. Creating Emotional Safety

- Imagine yourself in a safe, peaceful place – a place in your mind that is just for you. (Beach, mountains, surrounded by a large bubble, a tall tower, etc.) You can go here at any time. Your body and your mind are safe here. Allow your mind-body to relax as you notice aspects of your safe place:
  - The color of your surroundings
  - The feeling inside yourself
  - The sounds around you
  - What does it smell like here?
  - Notice the taste of the air
  - Change what you don't like – it's your special place that you create!
  - Penny Simkin encourages you to explore these thoughts while you feel safe in your special place:
    - “When I am safe, I...”
    - “In what situation or place am I most comfortable?”
    - “Who is helpful to me?”
    - “What images help me feel safe?”
    - “Is my safety associated with a symbol of power, like an animal or structure?”
    - Find your inner guide or wisdom – your protective self
    - Reach out to spiritual figures

When you are in this safe and sacred space, painful or icky feelings may sneak in. If they do, here are a few ideas to contain and release these thoughts or feelings:

- Place your feelings in a “locked safe”
- Send them on an airplane to a faraway place
- Place them in the hands of your spiritual leader: Jesus, Mohammad, the Saints, etc.
- Turn them off like a garden hose when they flood your mind
- Turn the volume down, like a radio
- Weave them into a big quilt and place it into a trunk
- Come up with your own idea for containing your feelings

## 2. Ground Yourself in the Present

- This exercise is also known as mindfulness. This technique helps remind you that you are here today, and no longer in your past. Today is full of wonderful new possibilities! If you begin to feel out of control, try the following:
  - Feel your feet on the ground below you
  - Notice your own movements and how your body feels on the chair, bed, earth, etc.
  - Look at the objects nearby; notice their shape and color, name them, what is their purpose?, how do they feel?
  - Choose one thing to focus on: a person’s face, a tree, a picture, a flower
  - Hold someone’s hand
  - Notice what is touching you, and what you are touching
  - Listen to the sounds around you. Examine them.
  - Listen to your body breathing – let your body breathe on its own
- Some other exercises to keep you in the present:
  - Dance, yoga, swim to release tension
  - Draw a picture of your body – name and validate each part with color
  - Talk with someone special to you
  - Acknowledge your feelings

## 3. Stress Management

- Managing your stress increases your body awareness, relaxation, and your ability to calm and control your feelings. Involving both your body and your mind, you may be able to become aware of and alleviate tension. Awareness of your tension, your thoughts and your breathing pattern are huge steps to overcome anxiety and stress. Try these techniques for immediate stress relief:
  - Take a few deep, slow breaths:
    - Feel your body release and relax with loose limbs, sagging shoulders, open hands, loose head and neck. Breathe in relaxation and breathe out tension. You might opt to count your breaths in and out: Breathe in 1...2...3..., Breathe out 1...2...3...4...5...6... Repeat
    - Close your eyes and listen to your breath. Slow down your exhale each time
    - Imagine an inner smile and let your face smile
    - Imagine your place of safety
    - Practice yoga
    - Talk to yourself: I am not going to die; I am safe; Breathing comes easy to me; I’m OK; I’m letting go; I am alive
    - Practice Progressive Relaxation – See your midwife for the script, app, or recording ( I would provide them with Andrew Johnson’s Positive Pregnancy app, the text from pages 221-224 or other progressive scripts and/or allow them to record my voice or partner’s voice as we practice this at a visit.)

#### 4. Creative Expression

- We appreciate that sometimes words and thoughts can only be expressed creatively. Using art to release and heal has been shown to be extraordinarily effective. It allows the survivor to express herself without hurting others or herself. It can be very empowering:
  - Keep a journal – write your thoughts, feelings, reactions in your diary or notebook. This is a special tool for you, and doesn't have to be shared with anyone. Have a dialogue with yourself in this safe space or with those that have hurt you.
  - Write a story about you or your pain.
  - Doodle, scribble, draw shapes and patterns that describe your feelings or self. Use paper, canvas, crayons, paint, etc.
  - Write a letter to release your feelings – don't send it.
  - Record your spoken feelings and thoughts.
  - Sculpt yourself, your feelings, and your situation.
  - Draw your symptoms or reactions, and then draw them being healed or what needs to happen in order for it to get better.
  - Draw yourself overcoming your obstacle(s). Draw yourself healed.

#### 5. Anger Release

- Feeling anger is a normal and natural reaction to any type of abuse. Managing that anger is a step toward freedom. Being able to release your anger without hurting yourself or anyone else can be a powerful tool to help you feel better and in control. When these techniques are needed, set a specific amount of time that you plan to spend releasing your anger, and end this small amount of time (a few minutes) with a few deep, cleansing breaths and a feeling of calm. Practice this technique in a safe space.
  - Breathe
  - Move
  - Use strong physical movements
  - Punch pillows
  - Scream without disturbing anyone
  - Yell into pillows
  - Kick a ball
  - Stomp
  - Run
  - Throw a rock into a safe space: pond, hole, rock pile, field, etc.
  - Rip up a magazine, paper, or rags
  - Recognize that with every action you are releasing some of your anger
  - Imagine the offender sitting in a chair before you; say your feelings out loud
  - Write a letter that you won't send to this person expressing all of your frustration and anger

#### 6. Self-Talk

- Whenever you feel overwhelmed with thoughts that are racing through your mind, or if the thought are on a loop that repeats over and over, try acknowledging them and repeating positive phrases to yourself. Some examples:
  - I know these feelings are from the past.
  - This is now. I am here.
  - I am not a child anymore.
  - I deserve to be treated with respect.
  - That was then. I am safe now.
  - My baby takes the pain away.
  - My body knows just what to do.
  - I love me. I love me for being me.

- Consider putting these statements on cards to carry with you, or post somewhere as a reminder.

## 7. Involve Other People

- Having a trusted person by your side as you encounter times of stress can help you feel safe and give you an outlet for processing after the event. Your trusted person can be there in any form you wish: next to you, on the phone, a prayer partner, or over video chat. Let them know how they can be of help to you by providing helpful feedback, just listening, allowing you to email or leave messages or sitting with you during appointments. Below are some suggestions for people to have on your side during stressful times:
  - Friend
  - Relative
  - Doula
  - Counselor
  - Therapist
  - Partner
  - Spiritual advisor
  - Childbirth educator

We are happy to support you during your journey to healing and preparation for birth. Please know that we are here to help you in a manner that is comfortable for you. Please reach out at any time.

## References:

England, P., & Horowitz, R. (1998). *Birth from within: An extra-ordinary guide to childbirth preparation*. Albuquerque, N.M.: Partera Press.

Simkin, P., & Klaus, P. (2004). *When survivors give birth: Understanding and healing the effects of early sexual abuse on childbearing women*. Seattle, Washington: Classic Day.