

Breastfeeding after Sexual Trauma

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For adult survivors of sexual abuse or assault, breastfeeding can be difficult. Unfortunately, sexual trauma is relatively common, affecting approximately 20 to 25 percent of women. Abuse survivors can experience a full range of responses to breastfeeding: from really disliking it to finding it tremendously healing.

Some people assume that survivors of sexual trauma do not want to breastfeed. But that is not what researchers have found. Two studies have found that abuse survivors were more likely to plan to breastfeed while pregnant, and start breastfeeding once their baby was born than non-abused women. And sexual trauma survivors breastfeed at almost exactly the same rates as women with no history of trauma.

If you are an abuse survivor who wants to breastfeed, I congratulate you for making a positive life choice to overcome your past and parent well. But I also want to acknowledge that you may face some unique challenges. I've included both sexual abuse and assault in this article because I have found that both can make a difference.

Sexual abuse is something that can happen within your family and can include everything from fondling to rape. Sexual assault often occurs outside the family and can also include attacks by peers. I have found that women have similar reactions to both of these experiences. Even if the sexual abuse did not happen in your family, your family may have been impaired in other ways, such as parental depression, partner violence or alcoholism, which increased your vulnerability to sexual assault.

If you are having a hard time with breastfeeding, I have some specific suggestions that mothers have shared with me over the years. But mostly I suggest that you give yourself permission to do whatever works for and helps you. If you are having difficulties, your first step is to try to figure out what makes you uncomfortable. Is it nighttime feeding? Is it your baby touching other parts of your body while nursing? Is it latching on? Is it the intense skin-to-skin contact? Is it all of the above? The intense physical contact of breastfeeding may be very uncomfortable for trauma survivors in general. You might find breastfeeding painful because your abuse experiences lowered your pain threshold. The act of breastfeeding may also trigger flashbacks. There is a whole range of possible things that might be uncomfortable for you. If you're not sure, try

keeping a diary for a week or so to see if you can identify some specific triggers.

Once you identify the trigger, the next step is to figure out if you can address the problem. For example, if skin-to-skin contact is bothering you, can you put a towel or cloth between you and the baby? Can you avoid the feedings that make you uncomfortable? Nighttime feedings are often a good candidate. Would you be more comfortable if you pumped and fed your baby with a bottle? Can you hold baby's other hand while breastfeeding to keep her from touching your body? Can you distract yourself while breastfeeding with TV or a book. (Many mothers have told me that this works well for them.) Experiment and find out what helps.

Also remember that some breastfeeding is better than none. You may not be able to fully breastfeed, but every little bit helps. Even if you must pump milk and use a bottle; even if you are only breastfeeding once a day. Some abuse survivors find that they never love breastfeeding, but they learn to tolerate it. And that at least helps them meet their goals. Being able to tolerate might also be a more realistic goal for you.

In summary, past abuse does not have to be the blueprint for the rest of your life. I have known many abuse survivors who have gone on to become wonderful mothers. I am confident that you can, too.

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