

BREASTFEEDING FROM WITHIN™

By *Virginia Bobro, IBCLC*

Birthing From Within® encourages and teaches “doing the next best thing” when it comes to making decisions within the flow of labor and birth. Parents are prepared mentally and emotionally to be present and open to doing what needs be done next, even if it is not what they originally wanted or planned for. The same mindset is important during the postpartum adjustment, especially when moving through the breastfeeding journey. Yes, it is a journey, and one that lasts much longer than the journey of birth itself. How a mother mentally and emotionally prepares for breastfeeding can make a profound difference in her ability to cope, be resourceful and flexible, and see herself, her baby, and their joint experience in a positive light.

Many breastfeeding mothers must change their perception of what a “successful” breastfeeding relationship is, as they go along. For a variety of reasons, some mothers need to wean much earlier than they hoped. Others must supplement with bottles or formula. These are opportunities for them to re-envision how to nurture and nourish their babies. Many mothers are humbled when presented with difficult circumstances and may have to overcome righteousness and judgment (both of themselves and of others), before being able to embrace their new reality. Even the most optimistic, intelligent, healthy, supported, and determined woman can struggle with breastfeeding; it is no reflection on her abilities as a mother.



In the days, weeks, months, and even years that a woman is breastfeeding, she may face numerous obstacles, detours, doubts, and unexpected events. If she is unable to cope with them, especially if breastfeeding ends because of them, she may hold negative beliefs about herself, and possibly about her baby, partner, workplace, care providers, and community at-large. When breastfeeding does not go as hoped or expected, a mother can feel regret, anger, blame, guilt, and grief. Her mind may spin with “what-ifs,” second-guessing, victimization, and harsh judgments. Harmful self-talk and newly forming negative beliefs begin to affect her self-esteem, her ability to receive support, and her relationships with her baby, partner, and other mothers. Certainly, her future breastfeeding experiences will be affected. If she feels victimized in some way (e.g., she didn’t get the desired support or accurate, timely information), she may hold onto her negative experience for the rest of her life. How often do women share their “breastfeeding horror stories” in a futile and painful attempt to process these unresolved, and often unacknowledged, experiences?

Preventing or lessening this sort of stress and pain has been a hallmark of *Birthing From Within’s* model for decades. We would like to share our perspective and some effective strategies for helping women truly and deeply prepare for the intensity of becoming a mother, breastfeeding, caring for and bonding with her baby.

1. Learn to cope with intense situations.

During pregnancy, learning and practicing mindfulness help a woman later manage the intensity of labor, postpartum, and breastfeeding. Pain-coping, focusing, and mindfulness practices (*Birthing From Within*, pp. 213-238) help to still the mind, quiet negative self-talk, and reduce stress and suffering when faced with painful physical sensations, including fatigue and breast soreness. Mindfulness also increases patience, resilience, and the flow of beneficial hormones when coping with a new baby, physical recovery from birth, and breastfeeding challenges. Commitment to using these skills in daily while pregnant means that when difficult physical and emotional moments arise, the mother will have a ready-to-use habit that can be effective immediately.

2. Get a breastfeeding “reality check.”

Breastfeeding and mother-baby bonding *are* natural processes, but that doesn't mean it will be quick, straightforward, or easy. Having a clear idea of the many ways breastfeeding and bonding can unfold helps women to prepare both practically and emotionally. Her knowledge of and expectations about the normal course of breastfeeding, common challenges and solutions, the strength of her support system, and available resources should all be discussed and honestly evaluated. Hanging out with breastfeeding moms while pregnant (e.g., La Leche League meetings) can help a mother-to-be to see and hear various problems and solutions, which helps her construct realistic expectations (and also provide a ready-made support system if challenges or questions do arise!) If her fantasy is of baby immediately and always latching on painlessly and effectively, and her falling completely in love with her baby the moment it is born, then a frank conversation about the many different ways that breastfeeding and bonding can begin and progress is important.

When she hears breastfeeding stories that generalize, simplify, or are one-sided, she can try to restore balance by finding out more. If it is a negative story, she could ask the storyteller: “How did you cope?” or “What was helpful, or made things a bit easier for you?” or “Share a positive thing that happened even while you were struggling.” If the story is a simplistic or unrealistically magical one, the mother can prompt, “Were there any surprises or bumps in the road? What did you do next?” or “What was most helpful to you in the first few weeks?” The answers to these solution-focused questions can be true gems of wisdom.

3. Explore assumptions, fears, and resources.

Taking time to explore her assumptions and fears about becoming a mother is an important task of preparation. A Birthing From Within exercise, “Tracking My Tigers” (*Birthing From Within*, pp. 118-119) helps mothers come to terms with what they are anxious about and inspires them to envision and mobilize all their inner and outer resources. When women know that they can influence **but not control** what happens, they can see the wisdom of preparing for all possibilities. It builds their confidence and sense of inner power to know that they can get through it, no matter what unfolds.

4. Compassion and self-love

Once a mother is in the day-to-day experience of breastfeeding, she can continue to practice mindfulness, maintain self-care and flexibility, and reach out for emotional and practical support. When breastfeeding does not match a mother's hopes and expectations, she needs support to keep going, and to not get mired in “what ifs” and judgment. Moments of stress and frustration allow her the opportunity to completely focus on the present, letting go of judgment of the past and fear and anxiety about the future. The transition to motherhood is hard, and often breastfeeding or attachment parenting style are blamed for stress, exhaustion, or other hardships. Usually abrupt, emotional, fear-based changes to feeding and sleeping are not helpful. Just knowing that everyone struggles with the adjustment (even if many do not publicly admit it) can help a mother “just be” with the challenges of motherhood. As a new mother, what she really needs to hear is *not* more advice and information, but, instead, acknowledgment that she is doing her best. She can seek out wise mentors who offer compassionate listening, non-judgmental support, and reinforce her positive identity as a mother. (This is especially true when she has also had a difficult birth.) New moms can be under enormous strain (physically, culturally, and in their relationships), so one of the most important strategies is cultivating self-love and compassion; she is doing the best she can in a trying situation.

5. Breastfeeding From Within

Releasing an attachment to specific breastfeeding outcomes will reduce emotional suffering, in the mother, as well as those around her. The focus should be on the mother connecting with baby, and with herself as a mother. When mothers come to breastfeeding with an open heart and open mind (rather than attaining a specific goal of, say, exclusive breastfeeding for six months), every mother **can** succeed. When a mother loves herself and her baby, no matter what or how that looks, then everyone opens to the possibility of greater love and connection. That is the heart of *breastfeeding from within*.

See next page for a “Feeding with Love” meditation, plus recommended reading and resources.



Feeding with Love

This mindfulness practice can be done while breast- or bottle-feeding

When sitting (or lying down) to feed your baby, try this:

Begin to notice all the sensations around you, beginning with your baby:

Look at her face, notice the touch of her skin, breathe in her smell, her sounds.

Then begin to bring your attention to your own body:

Where does your body touch your baby's body?

How is your breath moving in and out of your body?

Where do you feel relaxed and open?

Where does your body feel tight, tense, or closed?

Gently and mindfully breathe into those places,

softening and releasing anything that is unneeded in this moment.

This may take several minutes. Go slowly and do not expect perfection!

As your body lets go of anything extra, feel your heart opening.

Allow yourself to inhale the presence of your baby,

loving her in this moment and loving yourself as well.

With each new breath, feel into your baby's heart,

visualizing a connection that endures beyond feeding time.

If feeding is difficult, your focus may go back to task of latching or monitoring the feed.

Do what needs to be done, then, when you are ready,

take another conscious breath and return to your opening heart.

Selected Books

Birthing From Within, Pam England

The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding, (La Leche League Int'l)

The Ultimate Breastfeeding Book of Answers, Newman & Pitman

Making More Milk, West & Marasco

Breastfeeding Made Simple, Mohrbacher & Kendall-Tackett

Biological Nurturing, Suzanne Colson

Selected Websites

birthingfromwithin.com

lalecheleague.org

ilca.com

breastfeeding.com

kellymom.com

biologicalnurturing.com



About the Author:

Virginia Bobro is a mother of three breastfed children (including twins), a board-certified lactation consultant (IBCLC), a BIRTHING FROM WITHIN Mentor, Doula, Advisor, and Workshop Facilitator, and was an accredited La Leche League Leader for ten years. She works with families in Santa Barbara, California, and is the co-owner and Managing Director of Birthing From Within LLC. She is available by phone for: lactation support; childbirth preparation; healing and support for women who had difficult, disappointing, or traumatic births. Her website: www.Motherways.org