

PREPARING FOR MATERNITY CARE

Free guide for you

A short guide for survivors approaching pregnancy, birth, or maternity appointments

SAFER Birth PROJECT

saferbirthproject.co.uk

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Welcome!

Before you read this guide

This guide is for you if you carry a history of sexual trauma and you are approaching maternity care, whether that is your first midwife appointment, a scan, a consultant meeting, or labour itself.

You do not have to read it all at once. You do not have to act on everything in it. Take what feels useful and leave the rest.

Michaela x



What you might be feeling

If any of these sound familiar, you are not alone:

- Fear of examinations, particularly vaginal examinations
- Anxiety about being touched by strangers, especially when you are vulnerable
- Fear of losing control during labour
- Dread about being exposed, watched, or not listened to
- A sense that something about pregnancy or birth feels threatening in ways you cannot fully explain
- Worry that you will freeze, panic, or shut down
- Fear that you will not be able to say stop
- Feeling disconnected from your body during pregnancy

These responses are not irrational. They are not anxiety. They are your body remembering something, and trying to protect you from it happening again.

You do not have to name what happened to you.
You do not have to use the word "trauma."
You just need to know that what you are feeling makes sense.



What you can ask for

You have rights in maternity care. You have a right to ask for things that make you feel safer. Here are some examples:

BEFORE ANY APPOINTMENT

- Ask who will be in the room and why
- Ask for a female clinician if that feels safer
- Ask to be seen by the same person where possible
- Ask what the appointment will involve before you arrive
- Bring someone with you for support

BEFORE ANY EXAMINATION

- Ask the clinician to explain what they are going to do and why, before they start
- Ask them to wait until you say you are ready
- Agree a stop signal: a word, a raised hand, or simply "stop"
- Ask to be covered as much as possible
- Ask them to talk you through what they are doing as they do it

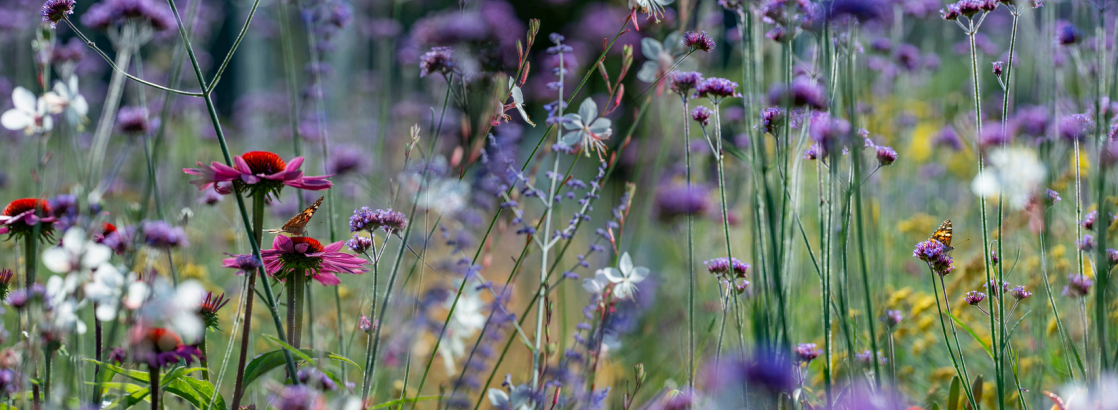


What you can ask for

DURING ANY PROCEDURE

"Can you tell me what you are doing as you go?"
"I need you to stop."
"I need a moment."
"Can we pause?"
"I am not ready yet."

You have a right to say any of these things at any time. A good clinician will respect them.
If they do not, you can to ask for someone else.



How to tell your midwife

You do not have to tell your midwife what happened to you. But you can tell her what helps and what does not, without sharing the details.

You could say:

"I find examinations really difficult. Can you explain everything before you start and wait for me to say I am ready?"

"I need to be covered as much as possible during any procedure."

"I have had experiences in the past that make some parts of care harder for me. I do not want to go into detail, but I need you to know that I might react strongly."

"Please keep checking in with me, it helps me to feel calmer."

"I need to feel in control. Please ask before you touch me and tell me before you do anything."

“I would prefer if its only us during examinations.”

You do not owe anyone your story. You only owe yourself a safer experience. Share what helps, not what happened.



What your birth partner needs to know

If you have a birth partner, they can help protect your space during labour and birth. Consider telling them:

- What your triggers are (in whatever words feel right to you)
- What helps you feel safer (dim lights, fewer people, being covered, hearing your name)
- What the stop signal is, and that they should use it on your behalf if you cannot speak
- That if you freeze or go quiet, they should tell the midwife to pause
- That they should ask staff to explain things to you before doing them
- That they should not leave you alone with strangers unless you have said it is okay

Your birth partner does not need to know the details of what happened to you. They need to know how to keep you safe now.



If something goes wrong during care

Even with the best preparation, something may happen that feels overwhelming. You might freeze. You might panic. You might feel unable to speak. That is okay. It is a normal response to an abnormal situation.

In the moment

- Say "stop" if you can, or use your agreed signal
- Ask your birth partner to speak for you
- Ask for a break
- Ask to move to a different position
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing



If something goes wrong during care

Afterwards

- You are allowed to talk about what happened
- You can ask for a birth debrief through the NHS or through SAFER Birth Project
- You can request your maternity notes to understand what happened
- What happened to you during care was not your fault

If you feel that something that happened during your care was not right, you can contact Birthrights (birthrights.org.uk) or PALS at your hospital.



Where to get support

SAFER Birth Project offers funded, non-clinical support for women and birthing people whose maternity experience is affected by sexual trauma. Visit: **saferbirthproject.co.uk or** email: **hello@saferbirthproject.co.uk.**

- Rape Crisis England and Wales: 0808 500 2222 (rapecrisis.org.uk)
- The Survivors Trust: thesurvivorstrust.org
- Birth Trauma Association: birthtraumaassociation.org.uk
- Birthrights: birthrights.org.uk
- National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247
- Samaritans: 116 123

You deserve care that feels safe.
Not just clinically, but emotionally.

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