



Birth Debriefing and Active Listening

Overview

Birth is an inevitable life changing moment for women. If you speak to a mother of a newborn, a mother of a ten- year old or even the mother of a forty-year old, you are likely to hear the same amount of emotion behind the story as if it occurred yesterday. Whether a positive or negative experience, a mother does not forget her feelings from when she gave birth. Even in the most difficult labors, if she feels supported, she can have a positive experience. In the same way, even in the simplest of deliveries, if a mother felt unsupported or unheard, she may have a negative experience. As postpartum doulas, our role is to hear the underlying feelings, validate and let the mother know that however she feels is accepted and okay. Be the safe place for her, and not the person that says, “Well, your baby is healthy, isn't that what matters?”

Even if a mother has had an empowering and positive experience, retelling it can further build her confidence as she processes the birth. This can carry over into more confident parenting where she will need confidence in trusting her instincts. If a mother has had a negative or even traumatic birth experience, processing becomes important so she can understand that her experience does not define her relationship with her baby or her ability to be a good parent. Regardless of how her birth sounds to us, it is important that we not project our feelings or imply how a mother should feel about it herself.

Active Listening

Active listening means being reflective or repeating back what you have heard. It means responding

only with questions or not responding at all until a person finishes what he/she needs to say. Active listening allows us to be truly engaged and make the speaker feel fully supported and heard.

As postpartum doulas, it is important that we practice active listening. Understanding the significance of birth, the postpartum emotions, and the importance of support is what sets us apart from infant care only, professionals. We offer a different level of support from friends and family. We truly grasp how to interact with and support new mothers. Active listening allows us to use our knowledge and skills to support a mother processing her birth story.

Building a relationship requires communication. Active listening lets the other person know we are truly engaged and shows we care. It also helps us to process the information being given to us. Active listening encourages positive communication, allows a person to process their feelings, and makes a person feel their feelings are valid and they are cared about. If a person has a conflict, is having trouble making a decision, or needs to process an event, active listening can help them to open up and process. How to facilitate active listening:

- Use inviting words so they can feel safe to express their deepest concerns.
- Use open-ended sentences or questions and do not be afraid of silence. Give them plenty of time to think and speak.
- Be conscious of your body language. Make eye contact, appear engaged and interested.
- Restate what you heard. Be aware of your tone of voice and be sure it is repeated in a non-judgmental tone.

Some helpful statements or questions during active listening:

- Repeat what you heard and ask, “Did I understand that correctly?”
- “It sounds like you felt X, did I hear that correctly?”
- “How were you feeling when that happened?”
- “It is understandable that you felt that way.”

The biggest aspect of active listening is listening to hear and understand and not listening with a response in mind. Your role during active listening is to hear as one processes, not to respond with advice or judgment. Help her come to her own conclusions, you are the sounding board, but she holds the answers.

Application and Understanding

1. Complete this sentence: “The biggest aspect of active listening is listening to hear and understand and not listening with _____.”

2. You are a postpartum doula for a new mother with her first baby just two weeks old. She had a long labor but a natural birth after an induction and epidural where they needed to use forceps to pull her baby out. She suffered a fourth degree tear. Her baby is a healthy, 8.5lbs little girl. She knows her husband really wanted a boy to carry on the family name. She had some vaginal lacerations and is in much pain when peeing. Midst the tears she says, “I have always been a happy person and I don’t know what is wrong with me now. My partner tells me I just need to get over it.” Write two paragraphs of your dialogue with her using Debriefing and Active listening.