



Becoming a Parent Whilst Healing From Complex Trauma

By Dr Adele Greaves

Are you thinking about becoming a parent?

Then you have already started your parental journey! The parental journey refers to a whole life stage starting with:

Pre-conception

Thinking about and planning for pregnancy

Conception & Birth

DIY or assisted; birth - vaginal or assisted

Post-natal

Depending upon your culture, this can last until 2 years post-birth

This life stage is NOT how it is portrayed in the media, no one has the perfect “Pampers” baby that smiles all the time and not all parents feel completely happy and fulfilled by the parental role!

Parenthood is one of the most complex and transformational experiences that anyone - female, male, trans, or non-binary - can undertake. This is especially true for those of us who are also working towards healing from complex trauma.



What do we mean by complex trauma and how does this impact the parental journey?

The term complex trauma is used here to encompass a range of traumatic experiences, including:

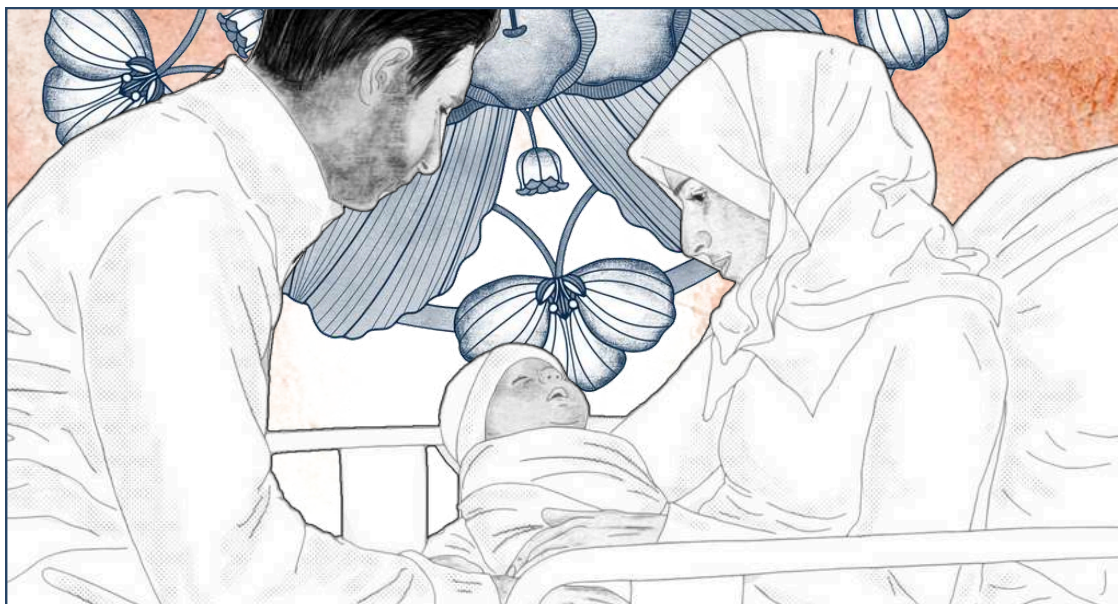
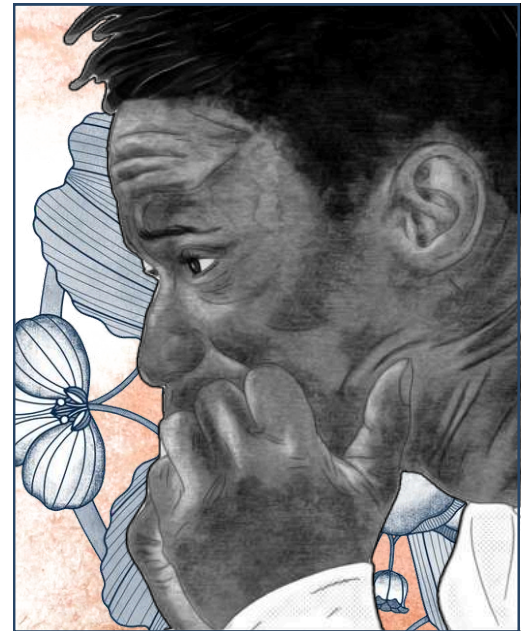


- Attachment trauma within relationships with core caregivers
- Developmental trauma
- Domestic violence
- Childhood abuse – sexual, psychological & physical
- Medical trauma (including birth trauma)
- Neglect – emotional and physical
- Rape
- Racialised trauma
- Relational trauma
- Single incident adult traumas
- War – including those who have been active in the military and those who have lived in, or left, conflict situations

As identified by noted traumatologist Judith Herman (1992), core to all these different traumatic experiences is a profound violation of human connection and safety.

This significantly impacts:

- Our identity
- Our sense of self
- Our sense of power and mastery
- Our ability to safely connect with others
- Our emotional and behavioural regulation
- Our ability to navigate the world with ease & confidence



Fortunately, the human body and spirit are enormously resilient, with incredibly sophisticated ways of surviving and adapting to traumatic experiences to ensure that we can continue to develop, despite trauma.

Unfortunately, it is not unusual for the parental journey to trigger unresolved experiences or traumas from our past. Selma Fraiberg (1975) named these “ghosts in the nursery”. This is for multiple reasons including:

As part of preparing to become a parent, you start to think and reflect upon how you were parented, potentially bringing to the fore any distressing or negative experiences.



For those who have experienced physical or sexual abuse, the physical changes associated with pregnancy and birth can be challenging and potentially re-traumatizing.



Emotionally attuning to and connecting with your baby requires you to feel and experience their vulnerability and raw emotions. This is an intense emotional experience which can also trigger difficult memories associated with vulnerability and connection.



Attunement with our babies also requires us to regulate and soothe ourselves as parents, abilities which we may never have had the chance to develop due to trauma.





Reflective Questions & Resourcing

Those of us who have complex trauma and who are on the parental journey can start to take steps to resource ourselves by trying out and practising key skills for self-reflection and regulation. By starting to resource ourselves, we can begin to build a set of coping skills to help us manage when we have a difficult or uncomfortable response to something.

On the following pages you will find the reflective questions and resourcing ideas for every stage of the parental journey. If you are on the parental journey with another and it feels safe to do so, work together where you can. If you are navigating the parental journey by yourself, you may find it helpful to reflect with a trusted other, if you find this supportive.

When Considering the Reflective Questions:


Take time and allow yourself the space to think about the questions from your body, then your heart and then your mind. Are there any differences between them? Are there blocks in one and not another? If you are unable to find an answer anywhere, how does that feel? This is about curiosity and exploration.

When Considering the Resourcing Ideas:

There is no end goal or 'right' way to complete these resourcing ideas. This is an opportunity to step out of autopilot and start to actively observe and notice your body, heart and mind responses. All the resources are an invitation to play and experiment with. Not everything will feel right straight away, so you may need to practise a few times before finding the resources that are right for you.

Staying Safe & Looking After Yourself

As you engage with these reflective questions and resourcing activities, pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and sensations in your body. It is usual for some intrusions or distractions to occur and often these will come and go. However, if you find yourself preoccupied with anything that feels uncomfortable or upsetting, you have not failed. Take a break, attend to your body and return to the activity later on. Looking after yourself is the work in that moment.



PRE-CONCEPTION

Reflective Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- Why do I/my partner and I want to have a baby?
- Am I financially prepared for a baby?
- Am I practically prepared for a baby?
- Am I psychologically prepared for a baby?

Resourcing Idea

Mindfulness: starting a daily mindfulness practice.

Actively observe and describe mental states and physical actions, rather than being on autopilot and responding from old ways of being that may be rooted in trauma.

Start by practising this for a small, tolerable amount of time every day. Core to this practice is holding a compassionate and non-judgemental awareness of all thoughts, feelings, urges and actions - this is easier said than done! Know that we are human and therefore inherently messy!

This practice can be done via formal meditations or just through adopting a mindful awareness to all your daily activities, maybe picking one to begin with such as when you go for a walk, do the washing up or have a shower.



CONCEPTION

Reflective Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- How will I cope if I cannot get pregnant straight away or need assistance?
- How was I parented and what do I want to do the same or differently?
- (If you are co-parenting) How do my parenting styles and those of my co-parent differ or complement each other?

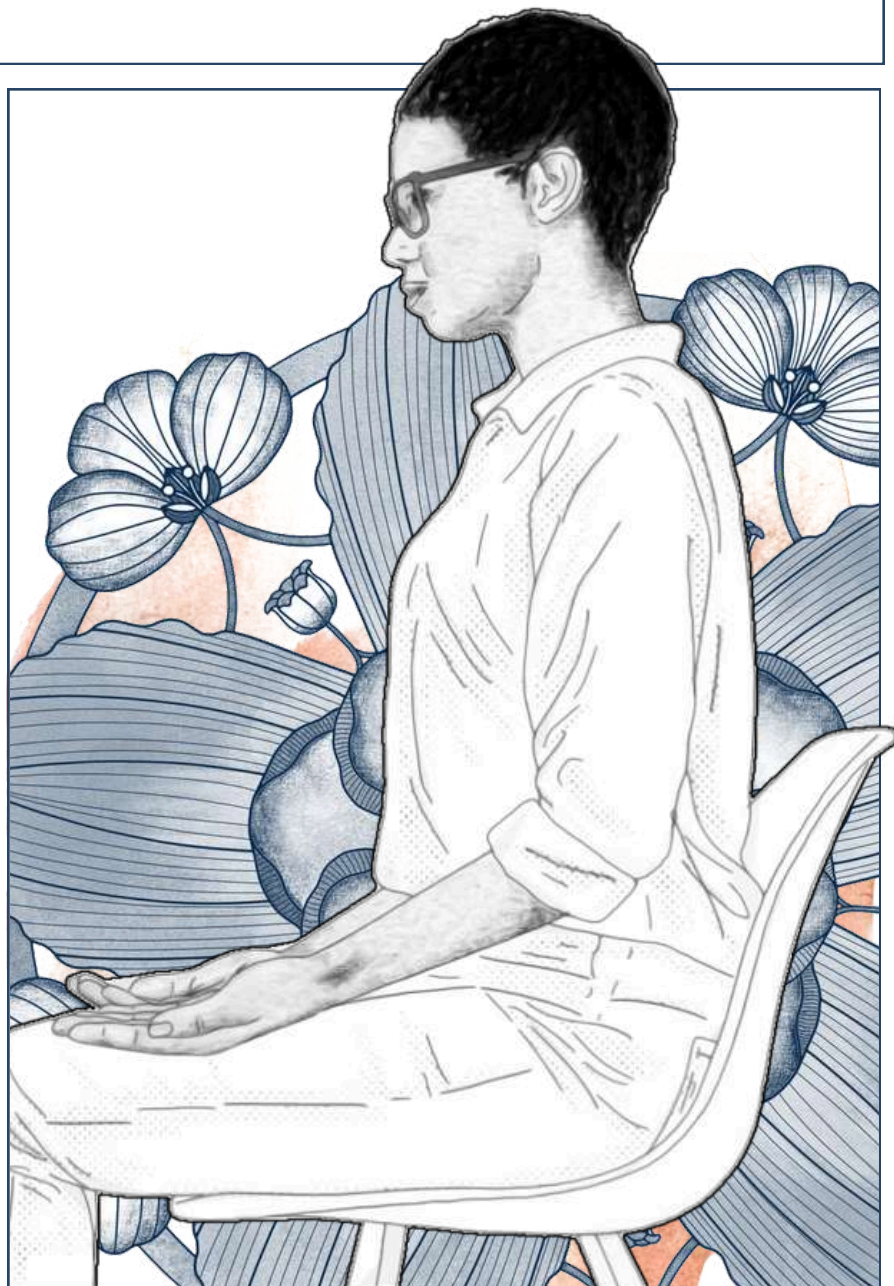
Resourcing Idea

Radical Acceptance: Accepting reality, as it is, in this moment, with your whole heart, soul and being.

This means accepting all your thoughts, feelings and urges in this moment, with kindness and non-judgement.

It is only when we accept reality that we can then free up energy to soothe ourselves, problem-solve and plan a way forward.

One way of doing this is by noticing if you are fighting reality (thoughts such as "it shouldn't be like this", or "it's not fair") and then adopting a posture of openness when considering our suffering: sitting upright, arms open and palms facing upwards, holding a kind awareness of all our thoughts, feelings and urges.



PREGNANCY

Reflective Questions to Consider and Discuss:

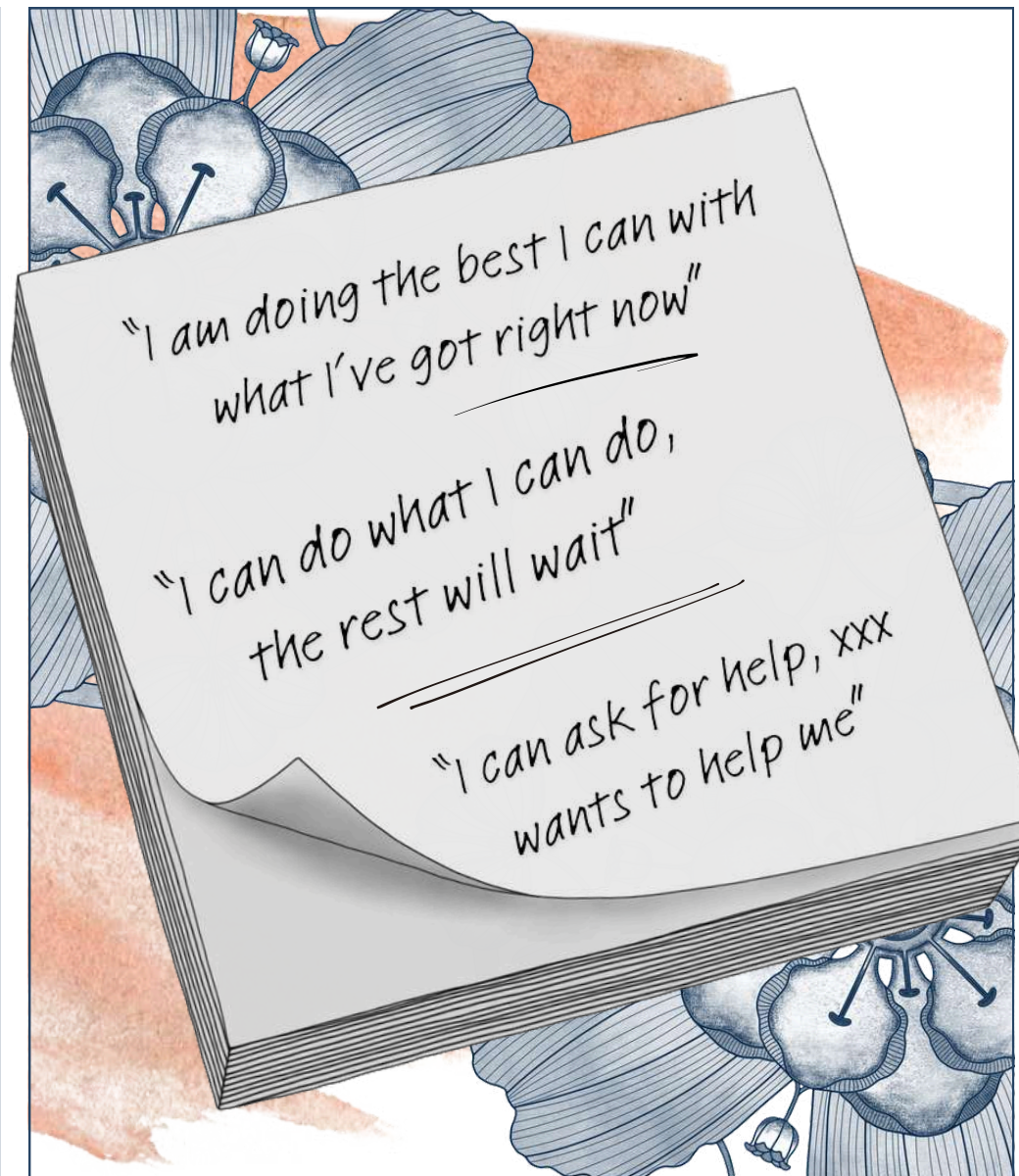
- How comfortable do I feel with my physical body and the changes that will occur?
- What unresolved experiences or traumas from my own past may be triggered by becoming a parent and how will I cope?
- Do I know where to seek support if needed?

Resourcing Idea

Self-compassion: Holding an awareness of our pain and suffering with an intentional attitude of self-directed care, kindness, and concern.

Purposefully take steps to be compassionate towards ourselves, including compassionate reframes of negative thoughts and carrying out self-soothing activities such as sitting outside, listening to music, reading a book, speaking with a friend about our concerns.

Make a list of compassionate reframes and self-soothing activities ahead of time so you have them to hand when they are needed.



BIRTH

Reflective Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- What are the essential components of my hoped-for birth and am I being sufficiently flexible and preparing myself for all birth options, including those less hoped for?
- How do I feel about breastfeeding and where can I seek support for this if needed?
- How can I begin to build a “village” of supportive people for myself, including other pregnant women?

Resourcing Idea

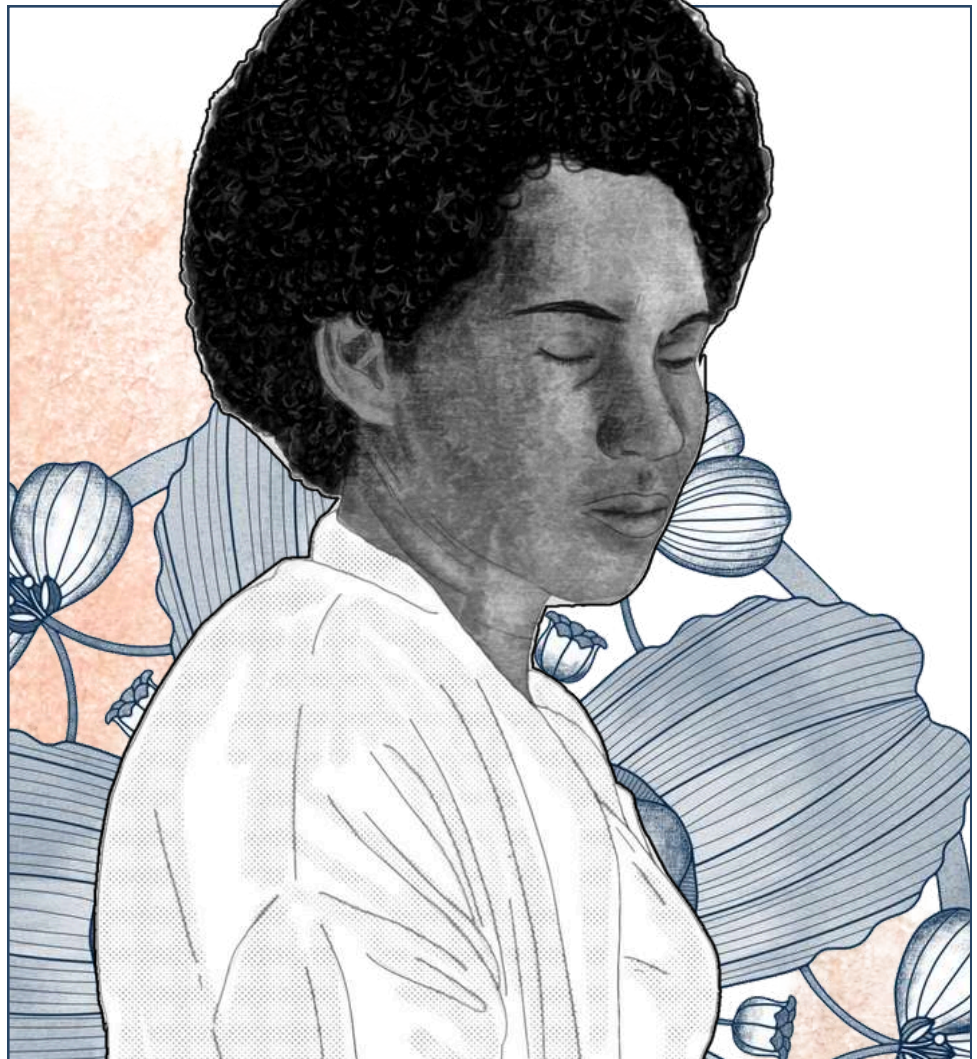
Positive Mental Rehearsal: Imagine your hoped-for birth in vivid detail and make it realistic!

Birth can be beautiful and it can also be messy and painful.

Think about how you are going to cope with pain and uncertainty: **“what strategies am I going to use to soothe and ground myself?”**.

Then imagine yourself using them over and over again.

This is an excellent way of getting your mind and body prepared for the actual birth.



EARLY PARENTHOOD

Reflective Questions to Consider and Discuss:



- How does lack of sleep affect me and how will I look after myself & rest when needed?
- How do I cope with stress, anxiety and uncertainty? Will these strategies be available to me when I have a baby? If not, what am I going to do instead?
- Who are the key people I want to support me and who do I not?
- How am I going to place boundaries around me and my baby which protect us as we build our relationship?
- What happens if I don't feel a rush of love for my baby - as not everyone does?
- What will I do if I struggle to be with my baby when they are crying or distressed?



EARLY PARENTHOOD

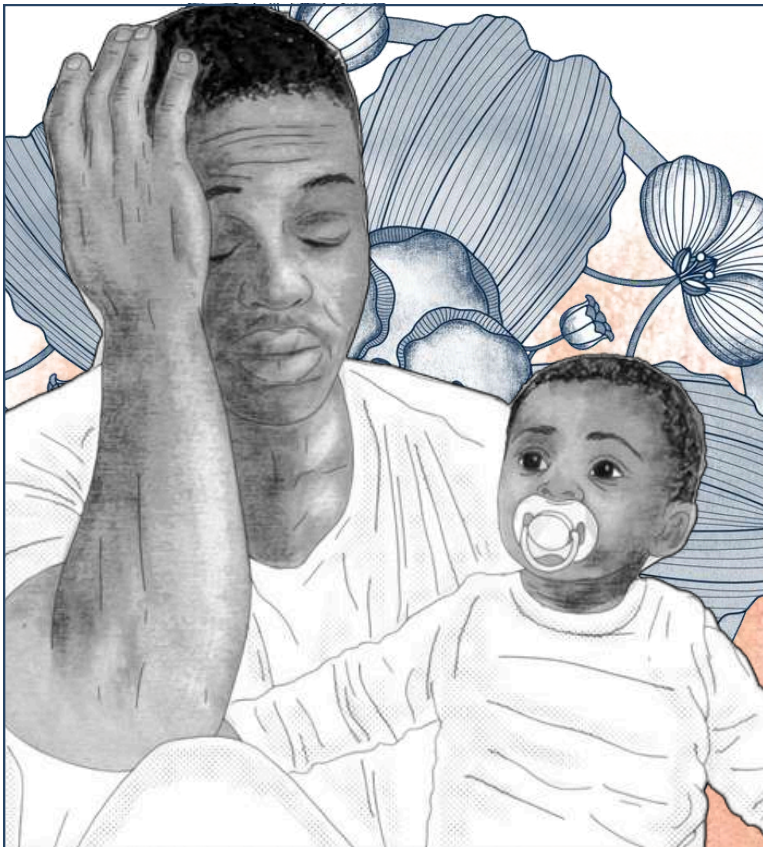
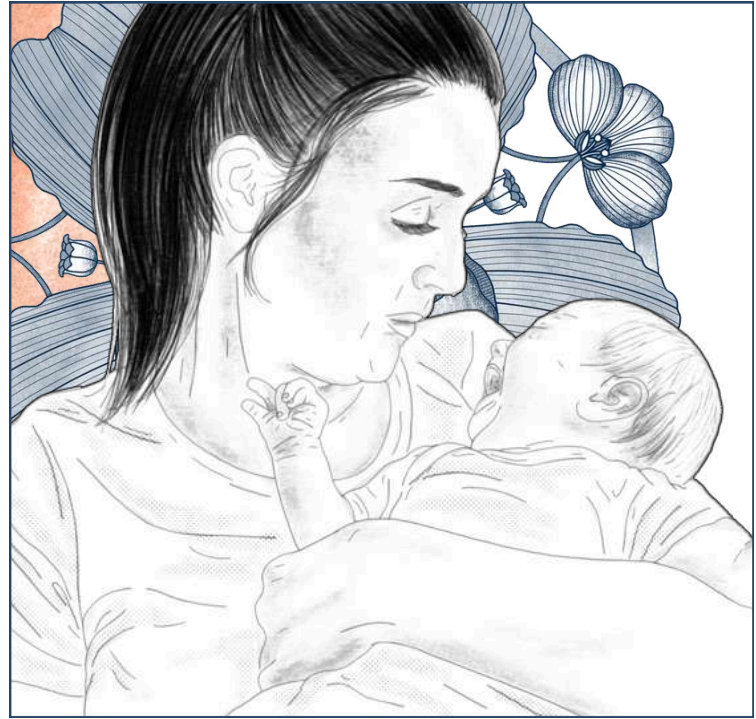
Resourcing Idea



Prioritise Patience and Self-Compassion: It takes time and patience to develop your sense of yourself and your skills as a parent and to get to know your baby and build a strong relationship, especially when you are also sleep deprived, emotionally overwhelmed and physically recovering from birth.

Whilst you undertake this journey, you will need all the skills discussed previously - mindfulness, radical acceptance, self-compassion, positive mental rehearsal - and as much support from others as you can tolerate.

The amount of support we need from others varies for everyone. Some of us may need to be around others a lot and some may need to be alone with their baby. Knowing what is right for you and being able to advocate for yourself is key. Just as every parent is different in what they need, every baby is different in what they need too and it can take time to get to know and attune to your baby.



Every baby is born with an innate temperament or personality, which will also be shaped by their experiences in-utero and during birth. All babies cry and this is designed to elicit a strong response in parents to mobilise us to respond promptly. Therefore **hold your own emotional reactions to your baby with kindness and compassion and ensure that you have sufficient support to navigate this emotional rollercoaster.**

Babies are born with an innate desire for social and emotional connection with their parents and will also signal when they have had “too much” or are becoming overwhelmed, by turning away or sleeping. Part of becoming a parent is getting to know your baby’s signals and it takes time, patience, and courage to do this consistently.

Above all, approach this beautiful, difficult and transformational period with patience and compassion for yourself and your baby. Knowing and caring for ourselves is one of the most important ways in which know and care for our babies.

If you are struggling to do this, then please reach out early and get help, as there are many solutions to your struggles and many people who want to help and can be trusted to do so.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

App: Baby Buddy – free UK app to support parents in pregnancy and during early parenthood. www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/baby-buddy

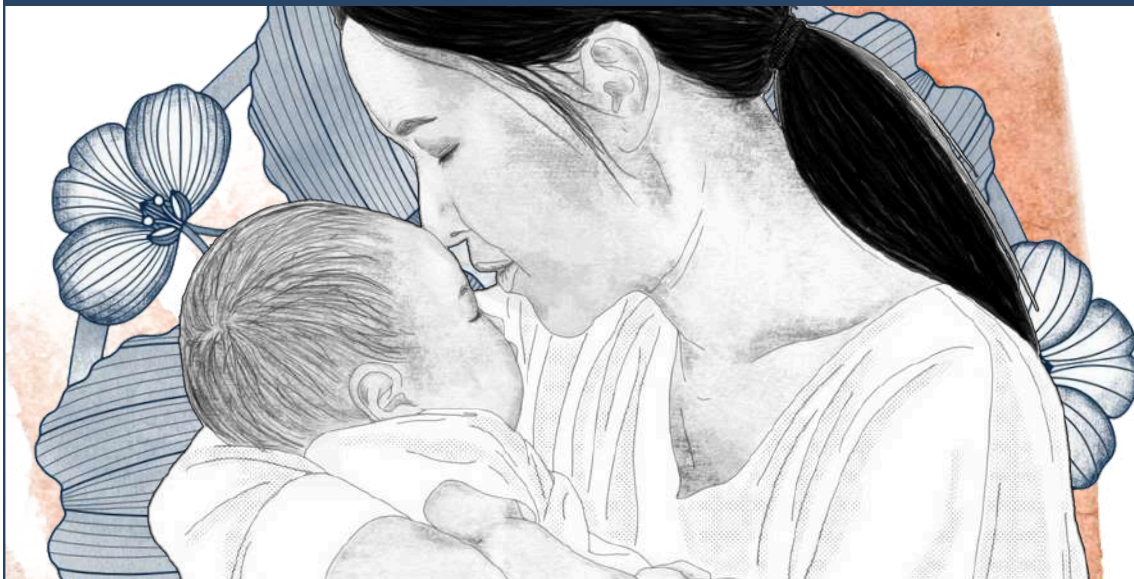
Book: Why Love Matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain by Sue Gerhardt

Website: Maternal Mental Health - www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org

Website: Support for Parents of Crying & Sleepless Babies - www.cry-sis.org.uk

Website: Help to Understand Baby Behaviour - www.brazelton.co.uk

NEW WEBINAR WITH PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST DR ADELE GREAVES



WEDNESDAY,
12TH JUNE
2024

£30

12PM - 2PM

BECOMING A PARENT WHILST HEALING FROM COMPLEX TRAUMA

This webinar seeks to equip would-be parents, new parents and professionals supporting new parents with complex trauma with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate this transformational life stage.

In doing so, it will consider the challenges of each phase of the parental journey, from pre-conception to early parenthood and consider how this journey might be different for those healing from their own complex trauma. It will also seek to teach and give a live experience of different coping strategies for each stage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Adele Greaves is a Clinical Psychologist working within the Beacon House Adult Trauma and Dissociation Clinic. She previously worked within Specialist Perinatal Mental Health and Adult Mental Health Services within the NHS. She is passionate about bringing a trauma-informed lens to the parental journey and supporting those with complex trauma to become the parents they want to be. She recognises and honours the vital role that parents with complex trauma play in breaking the cycles of transgenerational trauma, thereby ensuring that their babies and children have a better future.