“It was the Best of Times, It was the Worst of Times.”

The Lived Experience of Childbearing from Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

The adverse pregnancy outcomes associated with a history of sexual abuse, combined with the alarmingly high prevalence of sexual abuse, illustrate the need for research to understand survivors’ childbearing experiences. One in every five women will experience sexual violence in her lifetime. Research has demonstrated that survivors are at higher risk for more difficult pregnancies, substance abuse during pregnancy, greater stress and fear, and preterm deliveries. A history of sexual abuse can impact all aspects of a woman’s pregnancy and childbirth, thereby affecting her long-term physical and emotional wellbeing.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of childbearing, including both pregnancy and labor and delivery events, from survivors of sexual abuse. A qualitative, descriptive phenomenological research design was utilized. The purposeful sample included eight participants who were all female, self-identifying survivors of sexual abuse with at least one childbearing experience. Six participants engaged in semi-structured interviews. One participant shared her experiences via email, and one participant via a telephone interview. Colaizzi’s (1978) method was followed and resulted in 302 significant statements, which formed seven overarching themes.

The final result was the essence of the childbearing experience for survivors of sexual abuse. Survivors were not screened for a history of sexual abuse. Enjoyment and excitement were juxtaposed with guilt and fear at various moments of pregnancy, and labor and delivery. Survivors had no voice and lacked support. They overwhelmingly desired control. They experienced an innate need to protect their children from harm, from infancy into adulthood. For survivors of sexual abuse, the childbearing experience is a complex, emotional roller coaster, permeated by the past. Women’s healthcare providers can utilize the results of this study to provide safe, therapeutic care to survivors to prevent re-victimization during childbearing. The results make clear the importance of screening women for a history of sexual abuse and discussing the connections such a history could have on the childbearing experience.