



# Postpartum Imagery: Finding the “Good Enough”

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The postpartum period in the family life cycle is one that is fraught with ambivalence and anxiety. While a new mother's body is flooded with the oxytocin meant to link her in love with her helpless charge, it is also, often, simultaneously flooded with the hormones of fear and worry, combined with the foggy of sleep deprivation and the stress of learning to take care of this fragile, small human. It is this latter group of feelings that often go unattended to and are found ignored in new mothers, leaving them feeling helpless and alone.

I've been working with women in this postpartum state for over a decade now, supporting them through imagery and the creative process in order to access their inner "good enough" mother and to find compassion for their experiences and their own mothering needs. What I have found, upon reflection, is that the suffering of mothers in this stage is rooted in a cultural denial of the profound loss that is part of the experience of giving birth (and raising children) and the hidden sense that the joy is supposed to rule the day. However, the reality is that it is only one piece to the complex reality of creating a life with a family, career, and sense of self. The burden on women to "do it all" and "have it all" is great and the dialogue sparse and filled with vitriol and hidden agendas. The mothers that I see in my office find that they aren't allowed to speak to their powerful feelings of depression, confusion and fear when family, friends or colleagues ask about their experience with having a baby.

A few years ago I picked up a book called, "Mothering without a Map" by Kathryn Black. Ms. Black's book is filled with essays about mothering in the face of being under-mothered or without a mother. In addition to looking at the psychological and sociological literature, she interviewed 50 women with varied experiences of mothering in their own lives. It is a rich metaphor and storied book that allows for some discussion of the complex period and process that women, almost exclusively, bear and concern themselves with as they transform their lives in parenthood. Though we know the psychological ramifications of the parenting and mothering processes on the growing child, I have found that we, in the field of psychotherapy and in our cultural norms, have provided little in the way of reality-based dialogue and social supports for mothers in this early period. As a result, women desperately cling to pop psychology through social media, internet resources and popular books to find a "guidebook" or map for how to do this and how to feel about their own mothering.

The art therapy that I offer helps women navigate such a map to find resiliency and trust in their intuition while still acknowledging their fear, ambivalence, and even anger and resentment, as they raise their babies. I have found that finding the space, time and imagery to acknowledge vulnerability, pain and doubt provides a platform for growth into attachment, commitment and compassion. The new mothers that I work with find hope in expressing their own losses and lost expectations from their own mothering experience. Allowing these images to emerge and then

finding the hope, resilience and honesty in them brings them to place of acceptance where they can move into caring for their newborn (and then toddler) without being overwhelmed by their anxiety. They can then establish a new sense of self in this role of mother while maintaining their old identities. One mother that I worked with, after the birth of her second child, described how she viewed herself as a person with two appendages. These appendages were sucking the vigor and beauty out of her and she drew an image in charcoal of herself with her two young children draped over her as one large, ambiguous and lumpy blob. Over time, we revisited this image and discovered the subtle beauty in the form and in the connection that she had made with her children— once she had enough distance to find her own self out of the merged image.

In my practice, I've also seen that in today's era of information overload and perfectionism, women may find the notion of "village parenting" a bit hollow. We still have a ways to go before we allow ourselves, and new parents, to lean on each other to parent our children, and ourselves. There is plenty of room in my postpartum therapy groups to start building that bridge and to create supports for mothering when our "nests" of comfort and repose need a little shoring up. Within the safety of the group, I've heard women acknowledge the disappointment and outright anger that they have felt when they didn't have a friend or anyone in their communities who shared with them just how hard mothering was. One woman spoke up about how she now tells her new mother friends, compassionately, to prepare themselves for the difficult parts of the journey and not be taken in by the seduction of the media, which may paint a picture of domestic bliss. And within the safe space of the group, numerous losses emerge. Women share images and stories about difficulties with fertility, miscarriages, still-born births and many other losses that they have pushed deep down when give birth to another child, feeling that gratitude and blessing are all that they are supposed to share in their day-to-day lives. These losses and dark territories find a natural space when women are offered art making as a means to express their truer experiences as mothers.

Sometimes a workshop experience can be enough to offer women a place of opening and relief; for others, the ongoing relational therapy is needed. I've considered a practical outline for orienting the work: first, we of course assess and establish safety. Keeping a new mom and newborn safe is critical but, beyond crisis management, helping to establish a safe space and room for honesty about the stress is a key starting place. Second, we find resources for support,



*One mother's expression of grief and confusion as she processed the fact that she would only be able to give birth to the one child*

both internal and external, and find ways to manage and cope. This is a stage of concrete identification of self-care and self-soothing. Next, we look at the dyad relationship and the developmental process of the newborn to help the mother identify with the baby and establish a sense of connection. In this stage we push for the inner resource of curiosity and the possibility of learning together about who each individual is in this relationship. Then, we can begin the process of identifying the losses and concerns from the mother's own mothering experience. For example, one mother, learning that she wouldn't be able to have any more children after her first child, was able to put the story of loss into images and words. This helped her to cope with the deep grief and confusion that she was feeling in light of having a healthy baby. Finally, we move into a stage of new growth, finding hope, empowerment and a new sense of self as mother. This work is rich in metaphor and the concrete use of creative materials and imagery helps the mother find calming strategies and inner resources for becoming a new person in the relationship. Our offerings, as art therapists who know the potential that is inherent to the art making process, allow the hidden and verboten experiences of new mothers a place to be acknowledged, and give women's multiple and ambivalent feelings room to be seen.