

HEALING BREASTFEEDING GRIEF



HOW MOTHERS FEEL AND HEAL
WHEN BREASTFEEDING DOES NOT GO AS HOPED

Hilary Jacobson C.Ht

Rosalind Press



Ashland, Oregon

Healing Breastfeeding Grief has been compiled as an informational resource guide for mothers and their healthcare providers.

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for my mother

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INTRODUCTION

If breastfeeding has not gone as planned and hoped, and you are struggling with feelings of loss, sadness, anger, grief or shame, this book is here for you.

These feelings are rarely mentioned in books or childbirth preparation classes. Mothers tend to think they are the only ones feeling this way. But these feelings are not at all unusual. You are not alone.

Fortunately, mothers can heal. This book will assist you on your healing journey.

How to Use This Book

Most of my readers are sleep-deprived and appreciate a little help on how to use this book.

Part One is filled with strategies to guide you toward feeling better.

Part Two leads you through exercises to release anxiety, to relax, and to process your emotions.

Part Three contains interviews with healthcare providers who share their personal and professional experiences with breastfeeding grief.

At the end of Part Three, there are three stories written by mothers who share their struggles with breastfeeding grief, and their healing journeys.

For more information, visit: www.healingbreastfeedinggrief.com

Hilary Jacobson, 2015

Love and Nourishment are One

*I still need to hold you near
and feel your dear mouth close
about that tender part of me
where no milk flows.*

*This sacred thing that should have been,
this rite of every mother,
will not now, nor ever be
a bond, one to the other.*

*Yet though I feel this utter loss,
a nagging emptiness,
I also smell your warm skin close,
know you don't need me less.*

*Song and smile, touch and glance,
we dance our dance until –
scent and hand, hold and clasp,
it's clear: I love you still.*

*If love and nourishment are one,
and I love you just the same,
then let me give you love, my love,
that does not bend to shame.*

*If love and nourishment are one,
perhaps that's all we need:
to trust our bond is ever here,
regardless how we feed.*

-Hilary Jacobson 2004

Part One

First Steps to Healing

THE GIFT OF SELF NOURISHMENT OF THE HEART

While everyone agrees that breastfeeding is the best way to feed a baby, other kinds of nourishment are also important. How a mother feels, how we are within ourselves as we feed, love, hold and cuddle our baby, is also an essential form of nourishment that only we can give our baby.

During pregnancy, your baby's brain, heart and nervous system are finely attuned to your own.

After birth, your baby's brain, heart, nervous system, immune system, and emotional well-being continue to be attuned to you, and to thrive through the nourishment of your *presence*.

As mothers, we need to ask ourselves if we are *present*—that is, if we are actually *here*, in the moment, mentally and emotionally, with our baby.

The purpose of this book is to help mothers heal from any birth and breastfeeding traumas that prevent us from being present, to help mothers recognize the value of their *very self* for their baby, to help mothers nourish themselves and their baby from their heart.

WHAT IS PRESENCE?

When we were children, we intuitively recognized “presence.”

For instance, if we met a grown-up and they leaned in close to say hello, we might have known right away whether we felt comfortable and safe, or if we would rather get away.

Later, in school, we saw how a teacher's presence affected the class. With some, students were naturally cooperative and attentive, but with others, students were chaotic and disrespectful.

I am sure that you can think of many times when you were aware of someone's presence. But what is a person's “presence”?

Philosophers and religious leaders have circled around this question for thousands of years. What is it to be human? To be conscious?

Today's scientists and religious leaders debate these same questions. We're finding out that how we think and feel affects the body, and how we care for and nourish the body affects how we think and feel.

We are discovering that the intestine that digests food also contains tissues and chemicals that are akin to the brain, giving new meaning to the phrase "gut knowing." We know that the heart generates its own electromagnetic field, giving new meaning to "the guidance or voice of the heart." The heart's field, when harmonious, positively affects the brain, hormones and all our internal organs—and it also strengthens our sense of self.

The idea that we have three main centers of "knowing"—brain, heart, and gut—is gaining traction. Mind... feelings... intuitions... As a mother, you will have many opportunities to experience these different parts of your knowing/being over many years to come with your child.

For the purpose of this book, when we speak of "presence," we mean a mother's ability to be comfortable in the here and now. Another way of putting it is that your presence is your ability to settle and relax into the moment and simply *be here*.

Babies *live* in the here and now, and your baby thrives on your presence. Your baby senses your emotions, your nervous system, your anxieties and fears, and also your love, joy, and calm.

Many women say that they do not feel comfortable as a new mother. They might be upset or even traumatized by their pregnancy or childbirth experience. Breastfeeding struggles can be upsetting and traumatizing, too.

Mothers need to find resolution for these feelings so we can relax and be available to our baby and ourselves. Helping mothers resolve these feelings and become confident, comfortable and present is the direction we're headed. So let's get started.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

When breastfeeding challenges arise, the emotions that we feel can be so tumultuous and unexpected that mothers ask: *How did I get here?*

It might have begun like this –

Our initial breastfeeding issues made us concerned.

If we didn't get the answers or support that we needed, we began to feel anxious.

As our problems continued, we may have felt shocked, helpless or afraid, especially if the advice we received was contradictory, or if it did not achieve the hoped-for results.

We may have felt angry—why didn't we know about this ahead of time? Why did no one tell us?

And we may have felt sadness, or shame, or as though we were a failure.

Mothers often say that they are stunned by the intensity of these feelings.

Some say that they don't recognize themselves; they are shocked that they could feel this way.

While for some mothers, these feelings lessen with time, for others, they continue and even escalate.

If any of this describes you, please take heart. We are finding ways to heal.

YOU CAN FEEL BETTER

Here are five steps to help you feel better. This is just a summary, an overview of the journey. The next section and the rest of the book contain more detailed information and instructions.

Build your support team

- Find other women who have gone through similar difficulties. Reach out to friends, family, and professionals. Include your partner in your support team. The section for partners on page 37 is written especially to help your partner appreciate what you are going through.

Understand your issues

- Find out what caused the problem(s)
- Understand why it is so emotionally painful

Find remedies if possible for your problems; do what you can to make it right

- Work with your support team, listen to the wisdom of mothers and the guidance of professionals
- Be aware of your options and make use of them

Feel and process your emotions

- Allow tears to flow
- Find creative expression
- Dance, walk, move—allow emotions to move through and out of you
- Do emotional processing (See Part Two)

Focus on the love, on the connected and nourishing relationship that you wish to have with your baby

- Practice skin-on-skin and heart-to-heart connection

- Learn infant massage
- Infant carry, co-sleep or cuddle
- Practice relaxation exercises and visualizations or mindfulness, and allow these to help you relax and feel close to your baby

HERE ARE YOUR MORE DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS

Find Expert Help. An IBCLC (International Board Certified Lactation Consultant) is your first go-to person. Make an appointment to see the IBCLC who works at your hospital or WIC, look online for local IBCLCs, or get a recommendation for an IBCLC in private practice from your local mothers group.

Look for Peer Support. Join a local and/or online community of breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding support groups are found at many hospitals, and there is probably a La Leche League or other peer-support group in your area. Online groups may focus on specific problems, such as mothers who Exclusively Pump, or babies who have Tongue-Tie or GERD-reflux. Finding both a local and an online group is a good way to go. This can relieve feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Organize Your Support Team. Supportive friends and family can help in many ways so you have more time to rest, heal your emotions and mother your baby. Your team will probably also include a breastfeeding expert such as an IBCLC, and any additional practitioners that she recommends. If you have a special relationship to your doula or midwife, stay in contact with them and keep them in your team.

Talk about it. Words of understanding and compassion can go a long way toward helping you feel better. If any people on your team do not understand what you are going through, ask them to read this book, especially the first 40 pages.

If your husband or partner is having a hard time understanding what you are going through, reading or sharing the information in this book may help.

Understand. It is important to understand the reasons behind your breastfeeding challenges. Knowing “why” helps relieve feelings of helplessness.

Write in a journal. Writing frequently about feelings helps us process them. When we sleep at night, our unconscious mind continues processing the emotions and situations that we’ve written about.

Mothers sometimes find it difficult to journal about their breastfeeding grief. To help you, there is a list of prompts and questions at the end of Part Two.

Express Yourself Creatively. Pent up emotions can flow and be better processed through blogging, photography, drawing, painting, cooking, gardening, writing poetry or stories.

Let your feelings flow into your creative work. If you would like, send me a link to your stories, poetry, photography and artwork. I’d like to see them, and to link to them from my website.

Move your Body. Movement can be soothing, reassuring, and healing. Even surrounded by piles of diapers, mothers can make space to dance a bit, and do some yoga or stretching.

You might also dance while holding your baby, but keep your motions smooth, slow and gentle, and listen to soft music, so that you do not overwhelm your baby’s delicate nervous system.

Please remember that you have just gone through pregnancy and birth. Your ligaments need time to pull together, back to their pre-pregnancy tightness and strength. Be careful not to injure yourself by overdoing exercise.

Feel the Baby Love: You might feel judged at times, both by others and by yourself, but please understand that you have given your baby life, and

that your baby's heart, brain and nervous system are designed to be in a loving connection with you.

You are surely doing the best for your baby that you can in your situation. Concentrate on this positive sense of yourself as a mother and build that heart-to-heart connection with your baby.

Healing in the Shower. The shower or bath is often the only place where new mothers have a chance of enjoying self-care and pampering. Take advantage of this time. The exercises at the beginning of Part Two will get you started.

THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM "BREASTFEEDING GRIEF"

The phrase Breastfeeding Grief was first used in the early 2000s within the MOBI yahoo-forum.

MOBI stands for Mothers Overcoming Breastfeeding Issues. Our forum was the first online community where mothers could express painful feelings and give and receive support.

While the main issue we saw/see at MOBI is low milk supply, mothers in many different situations share their struggles and their need for emotional healing.

You see, in the early 2000s, breastfeeding experts did not know much about low milk supply, about baby's tongue-tie or about the food allergies and other unusual problems that today are more and more common.

Many professional lactation consultants joined MOBI to lurk in the background and observe how we talked about our problems in a supportive way.

After a few years of pooling our experiences, MOBI moms realized that both mothers and babies were presenting with problems that were not yet recognized in the mainstream.

Many of our babies have tongue- and lip-ties, (Google “tight frenulum and breastfeeding”). Often, when the tie is released, the baby’s latch improves and the mother’s milk supply increases.

Many of our babies also improve with craniosacral therapy or pediatric chiropractic, which helps babies settle more comfortably into their body.

Mothers with true low milk supply often have hormonal imbalances such as insulin resistance, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), insufficient glandular tissues (IGT), pre-diabetes, or thyroid issues.

Today, you can read about these subjects on many websites. But it all started through the mothers at MOBI—and this says a lot about the power of online groups to change the way we understand the world.

WISE WORDS OF MOBI MOTHERS

At the MOBI group, mothers often talk about their healing journeys.

In their own voices, here is some of their wisdom:

Breastfeeding after birth is an opportune and unique time for bonding, but it is not the only opportunity or the only way to create deep bonding.

Infant massage and time spent skin on skin and heart-to-heart are other ways.

Bonding is an ongoing process that continues through the life of your relationship. Your emotional healing is ongoing as well.

You are a good and caring mother. Your baby is lucky to have you as their mother.

Reach out to friends and family for support, for instance, ask them to do the shopping or bring you warm meals, so you can relax and have more time for yourself and your baby.

Realize that you need nurturing, care and love. Be gentle with yourself.

Find time to do things that you love, or discover new things to love that you can fit into the time that you have.

At the latest after your child's first birthday, you will feel better. You'll discover a whole new set of activities and pleasures to share with your baby.

It turns out that your baby does not love or need you less, no matter how those initial months went, and this is healing.

BREASTFEEDING AND POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

In 2014, a British study of 14,000 mothers looked at the effect of breastfeeding grief on the development of postpartum depression (PPD).

They discovered that when mothers who hope to breastfeed are unable to reach their breastfeeding goal, they are *twice* as likely to develop postpartum depression as mothers who succeeded at breastfeeding or mothers who always planned to exclusively use formula,ⁱ. Even mothers who never experienced depression before were at twice the risk.

This statistic begs the question: How many of these mothers were wrestling with breastfeeding grief? How many could have averted postpartum depression if they had received understanding and support?

From the point of view of mothers at MOBI, one of the main reasons grieving mothers develop postpartum depression is the feeling of being powerless to understand, influence or change their breastfeeding situation.

We have found that when mothers receive a satisfactory diagnosis for their breastfeeding problem and develop a strategy to move forward—they begin to feel optimistic. When mothers change their attitude from *all or nothing* to *willingness to compromise*, say, by topping off their feeds with formula, or feeding with a supplementer at the breast, mothers frequently no longer feel at risk for depression.

It is so important that a mother feels supported as she makes her own best choices, and that she can count on her choices being respected by her spouse, family, friends, healthcare providers, and community of mothers. Unfortunately, mothers often feel that they are blamed or shamed, and not

supported. For this reason, online communities that focus on giving respect and support to mothers with breastfeeding challenges are so valuable.

Good nutrition is just as important as information and support. For instance, women in the United States and Canada are often deficient in iron, which leads to fatigue, contributes to depression, and can be a factor for low milk supply. Eating plenty of good, so-called “essential” fats is also helpful, as these fats nourish the brain and nerves, and can make a big difference in how we feel. In my book *Mother Food*, I write about nutritional deficiencies that can affect both a mother’s health and her milk supply.

Anyone can suffer from depression. It is a normal reaction to a difficult situation, and does not reflect on a mother personally. If you are feeling at risk for depression, please discuss your situation with your doctor.

Please also understand that depression can sometimes cause mothers to act in ways that they otherwise would not, even harming themselves or their babies. Should you ever have thoughts in this direction, contact your trusted healthcare provider, your midwife, doctor, or therapist, or call 911 or go to your local emergency ward. Don’t wait. Get help right away.

HYPNOTHERAPY FOR BIRTH TRAUMA AND BREASTFEEDING GRIEF

While moderating the MOBI group, I listened to hundreds of mothers tell heartbreaking stories.

I often wished for a magic wand that would enable them to move through their trauma and grief so they could enjoy their time with their baby more fully.

My wish was answered when I became certified as a hypnotherapist, and developed a set of inductions to help mothers recover their mothering joy and confidence.

If you would like to try hypnotherapy, contact me through my website, healingbreastfeedinggrief.com.

JOIN A MOTHERS GROUP

It is not unusual for mothers to avoid other mothers. It is a sign of our times. With so many controversial parenting questions in the air, it can be difficult to relax and speak openly except with very good friends.

Controversial subjects include: birth and breastfeeding, circumcision, abortion, schooling, immunizations, television and computer time, the best diet, the best toys, the best everything...

However, these topics fade into the background in a mothers group that is dedicated to breastfeeding problems such as low supply, IGT, D-MER, Tongue-Tie, GERD, Infant Allergies, Healing Breastfeeding Grief and more.

Knowing that others understand and have gone through similar experiences seems to allow mothers to put aside their differences and build a community of support. Giving and receiving can be uplifting. It can be the moment when healing begins.

A Grandmother's Story

A mother told me this story. She is very close to her own mother, and she naturally wanted to tell her about her heartbreaking experience with low milk supply.

As she spoke about it, her mother began to cry.

It turned out that she, too, had struggled with low supply, but had never told anyone about it. Now she could finally grieve.

It is so important that we share our stories and listen to the stories of others. It can mean more than we'll ever know.

IN MOTHERS' OWN WORDS

I asked mothers in online groups to describe the emotions of breastfeeding grief. Their accounts may be shocking to some readers. Yet, knowing how other mothers feel can be helpful. You can truly know you are not alone.

Some of these mothers, just starting out, are emotionally bleeding and raw. Others, looking back, are able to express appreciation for what they have learned and gained throughout their healing journey.

If reading these quotes is uncomfortable, feel free to skip this section. Another option: I have put the mothers' positive thoughts in italics. If you wish, you can skim through and read these bits exclusively.

Christina

I sobbed for hours! Nothing could take away the feelings of guilt, worry and rejection. It affected my relationship with my new baby. I was so preoccupied and I missed so much in those early days! I felt isolated and alone.

Things are better now. There is hope! And I know my baby loves me even though breastfeeding has been a struggle, one of the greatest of my life.

Arielle

I could only produce 50% of my baby's needs. Dark thoughts and negative self-talk made me feel that I had failed my son, that I was unfit to mother. Not only did obesity cripple my self-esteem, but those first three exhausting months completely undermined my self-worth.

I tracked every single drop of his intake and output on charts for 10 months out of hypervigilance. Then I started to understand and research, look for and find support.

This journey has changed me to my core. Now I love myself, I love my body. I'm taking what I've learned about why I experienced suppressed lactation and using that knowledge to heal my body. This journey has been a lifesaver and I would not have it another way.

I feel so much empathy for women in the early throes of it, it's emotionally crippling and combined with those postpartum hormones and sleep deprivation, it's akin to surviving emotional warfare with ourselves. I am eternally grateful for this online community's help through an emotional nursing journey and now a wonderful weight loss journey.

Nicole

I felt so much self-hatred. I once punched myself repeatedly in my breasts. I was disgusted with their inability to feed my failure-to-thrive child or to letdown to the pump. I was sick of having unexplainable plugged ducts and mastitis. My breasts were my enemy. This was before I knew that a posterior tongue-tie was causing every one of these issues.

To this day I get sick with guilt thinking of the hypoallergenic formula I was forced to give my failure-to-thrive baby for nine months while I worked through major breastfeeding issues. He was so unbelievably sick and became sicker every day. This was because he had an unknown corn allergy; the first ingredient in his formula.

Elizabeth

I felt such a great weight of sadness in the early days that I was completely buried in it. *I still feel sadness for that time, but more as compassion now.*

I went through a process of grief and mourning that changed subtly over time throughout the first year of our breastfeeding journey. I blamed and hated myself in the first few months to a degree that I found shocking, even in the midst of it. We went through a lot to get pregnant, and I remember in that first month, struggling to feed her, having persistent thoughts about how I shouldn't have been a mother.

Anxiety plagued me like crazy in the first months. I worried about all the things I probably should have done differently, I worried about the scads of pro-breastfeeding articles I'd read while I was pregnant. And I worried every time I needed to nurse in public that people were secretly judging me.

To end on something positive, though, I feel amazing to have persevered through that first year.

I'm a social worker, but if time and money allowed I would love to go back to school to get certified as an IBCLC, postpartum doula, baby-wearing instructor...I could have a whole different career.

Salwa

I feel jealous that others can breastfeed so easily and boast about it while us less fortunate mothers struggle and put ourselves through so much heartache and stress. I sometimes look at my daughter and resent her for not wanting my breast although there is milk there. I resent her for not suckling properly, and I then resent myself for feeling that way towards her, and not being able to provide for her the way I so desperately want to.

Lea

I work at a breastfeeding support center. To help moms thrive while I couldn't help myself was an emotional roller coaster. In the beginning I was angry. I didn't find it fair that I spent my first few weeks literally in bed skin-to-skin with my newborn and he still wasn't gaining. I was jealous that other moms could leave the house while for me, nursing, then pumping, then hand expressing around the clock consumed all of my thoughts and actions. After the anger passed, I just felt heartbroken.

It took a donor mom's help to heal my heart.

Beth

In those early weeks I felt my grief in my chest like a hollowness, an ache. The hopefulness that is a new baby, combined with the emptiness of my breasts, the fullness of my heart, and the "overwhelmyness" of my brain/hormones was something I'll never forget.

Rosie

For a long time I felt angry at my body and God that I had been cheated of the opportunity to exclusively breastfeed my son.

Over time I became brazenly open about my low supply and unapologetic. I found peace with it and made it my mission to support other low supply mamas and help them feel less alone and ashamed.

Laura

When breastfeeding my first son, if he latched painfully I wouldn't take him off and re-latch. I would tell myself I deserved the pain and then make myself endure my 'punishment' for not making enough milk for him. It was a very dark place for me.

Lisa

Sometimes I'd just stand in the mirror staring at my breasts trying to understand how they could fail both myself and my son this way. I had learned that I had breastfeeding failure and was supplementing donor milk with an SNS. I was crushed and felt like a complete failure of a woman. It took weeks to not cry about it at the drop of a hat.

Sami

I labeled myself a failure and even thought, "I'm not a REAL mother," which I now know is absurd. I struggled immensely with feeling envious of women who could breastfeed. Envy is so much more toxic than jealousy to me. Jealousy is wishing that I can have what you have. Envy has an element of wanting to take away or spoil what the other person has and thinking that I deserve it more than they do.

So for me, I couldn't be happy for my friends who were nursing their babies. This is not who I am at all, so then I'd feel guilty on top of everything else. It was a vicious cycle of guilt and shame.

Rachel

I typically feel broken and exhausted. I feel consumed by the need to try and force something I may not be able to control no matter what. It makes you desperate. The exhaustion comes from all the hours of extra feedings, pumping, and then feeding formula if necessary. You never sleep and when you have a break, it's booked with appointments or reading or trying to get more help. And you're always under the gun because the clock is always ticking on the next meal, the next reminder that no matter how much you want to give this sweet little person the best start and fulfill a basic human need, that you're just broken. Other people make you feel stupid or lazy, like you haven't tried EVERYTHING already...or you're not trying hard enough. You begin to not feel human from the lack of sleep and trying so hard...and then you're too overwhelmed to enjoy this beautiful miracle. This was not how I imagined my start to motherhood.

Richanna

Guilt. I suffered with large breasts my whole life. Back problems and being "the girl with big boobs" were the reasons at the top of my list to get breast reduction at age 20. The doctor told me I would be able to breastfeed if I ever had children. Technically, I guess he was right. I CAN breastfeed; but following it with a bottle of formula was not what I had in mind. I got the surgery and have never regretted it until the birth of my son. For months, I felt guilty because I felt I put my health concerns before his, even though he wasn't here at the time of my decision.

But I exclusively-pumped for 6 months, and with the help of support sites was producing 75% of my baby's needs! So after the fact... I feel PROUD. I stuck with it (even if just for 6 months) and gave my baby 100% of what I could, when I could have much easier given up!

Hilary's request for comments allowed me to begin expressing my feelings, and that was part of the healing process in coming to terms with my struggling breastfeeding journey.

Brittinae

I would let myself have a few moments of mourning each day while I was in the shower. I would sit and sob and let the water wash it all down the drain... then I would pick myself up and go love my baby like I was meant to. My breasts didn't work, but my mother's heart did.

Holly

I remember thinking, "Maybe I should try harder. Maybe I'm not doing xyz right. Maybe the next feeding will work." And then I'd hook up to my pump because I was scared, scared to hear her cry while trying to latch, scared that it wouldn't work and I'd be reduced to tears again for the hundredth time. Eventually, I gained a new mantra. *"What is the most important thing? That she EATS. Does it matter HOW she eats? No. Does it matter WHAT she eats? No. Just. That. She. Eats."*

Melinda

Frustration. I remember feeling so frustrated with my little tiny baby that **JUST WOULD NOT GO TO SLEEP!** She would just cry in my arms for hours. I actually felt as if I was losing my mind. I remember that, after hours of trying one day in particular, I left her in the middle of my bed and went into my ensuite, screamed as loud as I could into a towel, and then banged my head into the wall and hit the wall repeatedly. Looking back that sort of behavior out of frustration also caused/causes me to feel guilt, shame, self-blame, self-hatred, regret and sadness.

Marina

I think the shame and the self-blame have been the hardest for me. I was so determined to exclusively breastfeed my twins and I felt like my body failed and let down my whole family. It somehow felt like something I should have been able to control or make my body do, and that I just wasn't strong enough or determined enough to force my body into producing more.

When other mothers talk about feeling sorry for babies who are fed formula it feels like a physical blow. I felt too ashamed to attend breastfeeding support meetings and I hated people asking if I breastfed because I felt like a fraud. Like I wasn't a real breastfeeding mother. I felt so ashamed of my body's failure to feed my children.

WHY WE GRIEVE SO MUCH

Some mothers, reading this book, will say, “Really? Do we really need an explanation? Isn't it completely obvious?”

They might say, “I just carried my baby within my body for nine months! I watched my belly grow and I gave birth! I was all set to breastfeed my baby—to provide all of my baby's nourishment from my own body. Now I am beyond heartbroken.”

But while for some, the reasons are obvious, for others, the heartbreak is perplexing. It seems out of proportion to the actual events, somehow.

They might ask, “Aren't we making too much of this? Being childish? Ungrateful?”

Explanations such as “hormones and sleep-deprivation” provide some comfort, but they also leave us unsatisfied.

Surely there is more to it.

In the next three sections you can read some theories as to why we possibly feel as badly as we do. Perhaps you will find some answers for your own situation in these sections, or be inspired to find your own interpretation.

ONE THEORY: THE INSTINCT TO MOURN

In 2009, a group of researching psychologists asked this question: Why do women grieve so much when their breastfeeding hopes and plans are disappointedⁱⁱ?

Here is the answer they found: When a mother is unable to breastfeed, it is possible that her brain, which is imprinted with ancient and primal patterns, actually believes that she has lost her baby.

The researchers explain that for thousands of years, if a woman did not nurse her baby, it was probably because her baby had not survived.

They theorize that when we do not succeed at breastfeeding, a very old part of the brain believes we are in mourning.

Some mothers do describe their breastfeeding grief as akin to having lost a loved one. With the rational part of their brain they know that their baby is alive and well. But emotionally, they struggle with a sense of bereavement that feels absolutely real.

ANOTHER THEORY: A MOTHER'S BRAIN SOUNDS THE ALARM

To understand this next theory, let's first take a step back and look at how the brain works.

As humans, the outer layer of our brain (cerebral cortex) is highly developed. This thinking part of the brain enables us to be problem solving and to use language. However, this is only a small part of the brain, a small part of who we are.

Older parts of the brain are instinctual. Their job is to ensure our survival and they do that by marking dangerous situations with stark emotions, such as pain or fear. For instance, you only need to touch a hot stove once, and a memory of the pain prevents you from doing it again.

The instinctual brain is always on the alert for danger. This is why, even if we love flowers, if we see flowers and a tiger in the same meadow, our brain tells us to run away.

Instinctive reactions are so important that they may even be imprinted in our DNA. Spiders and snakes can be deadly, and some people are born with a profound fear of these creatures. They inherit this fear as a *genetic memory*.

Could it be that strong emotional reactions to breastfeeding problems are a genetic memory as well? Could they be part of our mothering instinct?

Of course they are! These emotions alert the mother to danger, and ensure the survival of her baby.

If a baby is unhappy at the breast (crying too much, drinking too little, unable to latch or suckle well), a mother's brain will respond by firing off anxiety and confusion. These emotions are a signal of *red alert*; they push a mother to respond to her child's distress, to figure out what is going on.

In earlier societies, mothers would immediately turn to other mothers for advice and support. Another woman might even breastfeed her baby until her problems were solved.

In today's society, we don't have a tribe of mothers close by who can give us advice or share breastfeeding duties. Just the opposite: days might pass before we find the advice and support we need. During this time, the brain continues to sound the alarm, and it might even turn up the volume.

To the mother, unable to quickly find the support, understanding and direction that she needs, it can feel as though her brain is stuck in emergency mode. As her panic and helplessness escalate, she may become worn down and exhausted by her emotions. This puts her at risk for chronic anxiety and/or postpartum depression.

It is good to know that practices of focused relaxation and mindfulness are remarkably successful at turning off the brain's alarm system and restoring peace and quiet to the mind and heart. You can learn more about this in Part Two.

AT THE HEART OF OUR GRIEF

The first three months after childbirth are a magical and challenging time. So much is new! Babies enter the world and they breathe, cry, drink, digest, urinate and defecate for the first time on their own. Babies also learn how to relax and feel safe in their mother's arms, and how to sleep for the first time on a solid surface. Life is filled with new smells,

illuminated by electric lights and computer screens, and is loud with ringtones of phones, the sounds of traffic, and the abrupt and confusing sounds of entertainment.

But babies are not the only ones who are adapting to a new situation. As mothers, we also go through a transitional time. Our body heals. We shed extra fluid, our connective tissues start tightening up again, and our hormones first overwhelm us and then begin to even out.

As well as these physical changes, we undergo powerful emotional changes. For many months, we shared our physical space, our air, nutrition, brain chemistry and hormones with our baby. The loss of the indescribable oneness of pregnancy—even though it was not always comfortable—takes getting used to.

With my first baby, I was too overwhelmed with the excitement and newness of motherhood to understand how much I was hurting in this regard. But with my later children, I felt it keenly. The intimate and incomparable presence of my baby within my body was missing. Sometimes, I thought that if I concentrated, I could still feel traces of my baby inside me, as if he had left something behind—a handkerchief maybe, or an old love-letter. That is what it felt like: my beloved had moved out but left little bits to remember him by.

Today, we know that traces of the unique DNA of each of our children do in fact continue to live on within us, to become part of our body. I still remember the day I first read about that. Even though years had passed, it made me happy to know that their DNA continued to be inside me.

I cannot remember reading anything in breastfeeding books about how breastfeeding helps a mother heal from separation after childbirth.

Yet it is obvious: When we breastfeed, we hold our baby close for hours and hours each day. We are connected by the physical flow of milk, and by the hormonal changes that support an emotional flow of tenderness. Clearly, this intense physical contact between a baby and mother is important to a mother's well-being, and it should come as no surprise that mothers with breastfeeding challenges say, simply: "I am heartbroken."

Breastfeeding is supposed to be our path into motherhood. Now what do we do?

In all of history, there is no story that tells mothers what to do, emotionally, mentally or spiritually, when their most biologically natural path into motherhood is jeopardized or lost.

But while lack of “story” is part of our struggle, it is also an opportunity: we can create a new “hero’s journey.” By applying what we know today about healing from trauma and grief, we can forge a path from the heart of our grief to the heart of our joy—because we *can indeed heal* when we realize that it is our loving presence, most of all, which nourishes a baby and allows a mother’s brain and heart to heal.

Just holding your baby and coming into the present moment close allows love to flow between you. This is what you want to salvage—this essential bond, your unique connection.

Regardless of how a mother feeds her baby, when we cultivate heart to heart connection and experience the value *of our very self* for our baby, we can recover our confidence and travel our path into motherhood—with a new and wonderful feeling of wholeness and self-worth.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Use every opportunity to experience closeness with your baby.

Try co-sleeping (read how to do it safely).

Try co-bathing (read how to do it safely).

Sign up for a course in infant massage, which has many of the benefits of breastfeeding. In Part Three, read about infant massage with JoAnn Lewis.

Cuddle together beneath a blanket. (Be certain that your baby has an open flow of air and can breathe freely.)

Even if there is little or no milk flowing, if your baby will accept your breast, “breast-nurturing” can be a source of comfort.

If you bottle feed, create a quiet place where you feel safe and comfortable, and hold your baby close to your body, just as you would when breastfeeding. Keep eye contact with your baby, and allow yourself to feel the flow of connection.

The visualizations in Part Two, especially *Wrap Your Baby with Love*, will help build this connection.

ADVICE FOR YOUR PARTNER

When we find ourselves in a situation that is much more difficult than we expected it to be, it is tempting to want to simplify things, to remove the complicating factors, in this case, to say, “If breastfeeding isn’t easy, stop trying.”

This is the “helpful advice” that many spouses offer their wives when the attempt to breastfeed is obviously a struggle. They don’t want to see their wife feel bad, and they themselves are pained by her struggle.

However, there is no guarantee that stopping will improve the situation. It could make it worse—and it often does.

Your partner must find her own best path into motherhood. Even with added difficulties, learning about options and making her own best choices is important to her long-term healing.

What you can do: support her with your words and with actions. If you have time, help around the house, prepare healthy snacks and beverages, and shop and prepare meals—or contact friends and family to help out.

When you share time with your spouse and your baby, try not to expect her to be any different than she is, or that she feel better than she does. Appreciate your new life just as it is, messy house, emotional wife and all.

Your transition into parenthood is important. You are important to your wife and your child in ways that may be new to you. There are online groups and books and podcasts that talk about your transition. Find other parents and talk through your joys and challenges. Be good to yourself.