

EMOTIONAL SAFETY PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Briefing paper for maternity and perinatal care professionals
using the Emotional Safety Plan tools created by
The For Baby's Sake Trust

Emotion work, in practice

Emotion work in midwifery refers to the management of emotions by midwives during their interactions with childbearing women, their families, and colleagues. Emotional labour, as defined by Hochschild (1983), refers to the emotional work that people undertake to manage their feelings, expressions, and behaviour in response to the emotional demands of their work. Emotion work is a crucial aspect of midwifery practice as it involves managing both the emotions of the midwife and those of the women and families for whom they care. Research shows that emotion work can have a significant impact on midwives' wellbeing, job satisfaction, and quality of care provided to women.

Midwives and care staff undertake emotional labour daily, supporting childbearing women, people and families through difficult and emotional experiences. This emotional work requires midwives and care staff to be empathetic, compassionate, and patient, which can be challenging, including when supporting individuals who have experienced violence and trauma.

Research has shown that midwives and care staff can experience a range of emotions when supporting women, people and families who have experienced violence and trauma. These emotions can include anxiety, stress, guilt, and even burnout. Midwives and care staff may feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the violence and trauma experienced by women, people and families, and may find it challenging to maintain their own emotional wellbeing.

In addition, midwives and care staff may also experience vicarious trauma, a form of secondary traumatic stress resulting from exposure to traumatic events experienced by others. Vicarious trauma can have a significant impact on midwives and care staff, resulting in symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and decreased empathy.

A number of researchers have explored the concept of emotion work in midwifery, including Downe and Finlayson (2010), who argue that midwives' emotional labour is under-recognised and undervalued. They highlight the challenges midwives face in managing their own emotions while responding to the emotional needs of the women in their care. Similarly, Hall and colleagues (2012) suggest that midwives' emotion work is often taken for granted and not fully acknowledged within midwifery practice.

Other researchers have explored the ways in which emotion work is managed by midwives. For example, Hunter and Warren (2015) suggest that midwives use a range of strategies to manage their emotions, including talking to colleagues, debriefing sessions, and self-care practices such as exercise or mindfulness. Similarly, Fenwick and colleagues (2018) explore the concept of 'emotional alignment' in midwifery, which involves aligning with the emotions of the women and families in their care in order to provide personalised, woman-centred care.

Overall, the concept of emotion work in midwifery is an important area for exploration, as it has significant implications for midwives' wellbeing and the quality of care provided to women and families. By acknowledging the emotional labour involved in midwifery practice and providing support for midwives to manage their emotions, we can promote positive outcomes for both midwives and the women, people and families in their care.

It is crucial for midwives and care staff to recognise the emotional impact of their work and prioritise their emotional wellbeing. Strategies such as debriefing sessions, self-care, and seeking support from colleagues, supervisors or mental health professionals can help midwives and care staff manage the emotional impact of their work.

In summary, emotional labour is a significant aspect of midwifery, maternity and perinatal care, particularly when working with individuals who have experienced violence and trauma. The emotional impact of this work on midwives and maternity care staff must be recognised and addressed to ensure their wellbeing and ability to continue to provide high-quality care to women, people and families.

Ockenden Report

The independent Review of Maternity Services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, led by Donna Ockenden in response to serious failings in maternity care, set out an agenda to act on the lessons learnt and strengthen safe, quality and personalised care. From the outset, the review aimed to give parents a voice. The final report set out four pillars of essential action: safe staffing, well-trained workforce, learning from incidents and listening to families. The report recognises that collaborative, relational and compassionate care relies fundamentally on attending to midwives' and maternity staff wellbeing and workplace needs – and ensuring that families and staff feel heard.

In response - the Emotional Safety Plan

Emotional safety planning provides an empowering framework for professionals to practise emotion work and for parents and families to identify and share what they need to feel safe before, during and after birth.

The Emotional Safety Plan resources created by The For Baby's Sake Trust are user-friendly, visual tools for identifying and communicating emotional needs. The tools have been co-produced in collaboration with Best Beginnings, White Ribbon Alliance UK, All4Maternity and partner organisations and community advocates, as part of the Safer Beginnings Programme.

There are two sets of Emotional Safety Plan templates, each with accompanying guidance: one for parents and families and one for midwives, maternity and perinatal staff.

There is also a Safer Beginnings explainer film for parents and families. These can be downloaded from The For Baby's Sake Trust's website.



The QR Code takes you to these tools and resources

References:

Downe, S. and Finlayson, K. (2010). "They call it a choice, but ...": limits to contemporary choice for childbearing women in rural Kenya', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12(2), pp. 203–215.

Hall, J., Collins, B., Davis, D. and Thomas, C. (2012). 'Emotional labour and authenticity in midwifery practice', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 68(3), pp. 712–721.

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Hunter, B. and Warren, L. (2015). 'Midwives' experiences of workplace resilience', *Midwifery*, 31(11), pp. 1059–1066.

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Ockenden, D. (2020). ['Emerging findings and recommendations from the independent review of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust'](#).

Independent Maternity Review. (2022). ['Ockenden report – Final: Findings, conclusions, and essential actions from the independent review of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust \(HC 1219\)'](#).