

Fourth Trimester Podcast

Episode 59: Healing Birth Trauma With Guest Gena McCarthy

Sarah Trott: [00:00:05] My name is Sarah Trott. I'm a new mama to a baby girl and this podcast is all about postpartum care for the few months following birth, the time period also known as the Fourth Trimester. My postpartum doula, Esther Gallagher, is my co-host. She's a mother, grandmother, perinatal educator, birth and postpartum care provider. I've benefited hugely from her support. All parents can benefit from the wisdom and support that a postpartum Doula provides. Fourth trimester care is about the practical, emotional and social support parents and baby require, and importantly, helps set the tone for the lifelong journey of parenting.

When I first became pregnant, I had never heard of postpartum Doulas, let alone knew what they did. So much of the training and preparation that expecting parents do is focused on the birth and newborn care. Once a baby is born, often the first interaction parents have with medical or child professionals, other than the first pediatrician visits, is the six-week checkup with the OB/GYN. *What about caring for mama and family between the birth and the six week doctor visit?* What are the strategies for taking care of the partner and the rest of the family while looking after your newborn?

Our podcasts contain expert interviews with specialists from many fields to cover topics including postpartum doula practices, prenatal care, prenatal and postnatal yoga, parenting, breastfeeding, physical recovery from birth, nutrition, newborn care, midwifery, negotiating family visitation, and many more.

First-hand experience is shared through lots of stories from both new and seasoned parents. Hear what other parents are asking and what they have done in their own lives.

We reference other podcasts, internet resources and real-life experts who can help you on your own parenting journey. Visit us at <http://fourthtrimesterpodcast.com>

Sarah Trott: [00:00:39] I'm here with my co-host Esther Gallagher and our special guest Gena McCarthy who I will introduce in just a moment. And before I do I want to take a moment to remind everyone to visit our website which is fourthtrimesterpodcast.com and sign up for our email newsletter and also sign up to sponsor us through [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com). A dollar an episode would be greatly appreciated. Yes please. And also find us on Facebook and like us on Facebook and join our group. We would really really love that.

Esther Gallagher: [00:01:15] And tell everyone you know. As I'm saying these days to everyone, everyone you know and everyone they know, will have experienced the postpartum transition because we were all babies once. And everyone you know will experience the fourth trimester transition. Sometime in their adult life. Even if they don't know that's what's happening. We are all in this together and we can all learn. And we need to in this culture

Sarah Trott: [00:02:01] So we're so honored to have Gena McCarthy with us today. She's an RN and MFT And EMT are so we'll ask her to explain those to us. And she's a certified perinatal psychotherapist specializing in the spiritual and psychological care needs of parents and professionals, including trauma informed care and healing practices. She developed two local perinatal integrative health programs and a model for healing perinatal trauma effectively and in ways that feel safe and supported.

She offers one-on-one sessions and workshops using this model as well as mentors professionals to learn and offer it themselves. Her website is birthspiritualityandhealing.com. Check that out. So Gena, do you want to tell us in your own words who you are and what you do? And welcome!

Gena McCarthy: [00:02:54] Thank you. I'm so glad to be here. And I'm so grateful that you're doing these offerings and what Esther just said how we're all in this, that's very core to the work I do that all of us are facing really the same psychological and spiritual needs and growth issues. So anyway I got into it for that reason. I had a very traumatic birth when I was born into this world and I didn't know anything about trauma. And then later in my adult life when I wanted to have a child I kept having panic attacks. And I

didn't know why. And at that point I was a marriage and family therapist and also a nurse but I didn't know anything about really healing trauma.

And so eventually I started learning things and I'd say I actually started learning about 50 percent of what I know now when I had my child. And then I really kind of learned the other part after and that's how I was able to develop this model that is nourishing and feels good, and is effective. And you know I realized what was true for me is true for a lot of people that unless you really feel kind of nourished and safe you kind of don't want to do it. And so I'm really happy for this opportunity to share how you can really heal and have a pretty good experience doing it.

Sarah Trott: [00:04:36] That's so wonderful. And Gena, we're going to call this our Birth Trauma Healing episode. That is going to be the topic and the theme for this conversation.

Esther Gallagher: [00:04:48] Yeah. And Gena, I feel like you know the time is so right. I know that some of us have been doing this work for quite some time, various aspects of this work to do with the fourth trimester. And I know that the subject of birth trauma has really come to the fore.

Esther Gallagher: [00:05:15] And one of the things I just want to make note of before I hand it back to you to move forward is that birth trauma is one of those things that is often multigenerational. So, our mothers had a traumatic birth. We were born traumatically, our grandmothers, our great grandmothers, going back and back and back and especially in the history of post-inquisition European Western medicine. It's a common theme.

Esther Gallagher: [00:06:02] It's true perhaps, possibly prior to so much of what we call traumatic birth these days, women may have died and babies too as a result of dysfunctional Labor and genetic and nutritional impacts on pregnancy, birth and labor. But therefore that traumatic birth would have ended with that generation. Now we survive these traumas and we pass them on to our children, our children's children, and our neighbors children vis-à-vis stories etc.

And so while this may or may not be part of your topic I think that this stigma around birth in the West was traumatic. So that's just part of it. For so long. And all our efforts are making headway and we still have much to heal. And so I'm just super thrilled to have you on the program to talk about your approach. So thank you very much!

Gena McCarthy: [00:07:27] Esther I so appreciate your historical analysis that gives context to this. It really enriches the whole conversation, yes. So I mean that's the thing.

Gena McCarthy: [00:07:40] Even though I'm going to talk about how you can heal birth trauma effectively and feeling supported and nourished, I do want to say that my work is really about working with professionals and parents and everyone, because everyone in the perinatal community is a human being. And so whether you're a doctor, midwife, nurse, mother, baby or a father or a doula, whoever you are you're coming in with your own health issues and your own strengths and resources and your own unhealed issues and challenges and all of that is in the birth room and all of that is the pregnancy appointments and all of that is in the postpartum care.

So I just love that you gave that historical context and it's really true that nowadays it's we're kind of rising that divine feminine, that sacred feminine and the awareness that things can be enjoyable and safe and loving and embodied is really we're communicating with each other about that so I'll talk a little bit about healing birth trauma related to that.

Gena McCarthy: [00:09:04] So the thing is that you know of course there's all there's a million different reasons why trauma might happen but perinatal trauma has a very particular way of effectively being healed and so let's say I'm a woman who did everything supposedly you know, we say right which of course is a myth, but did all these good things and then had a very traumatic birth and you have the whole gamut of where this comes from.

Gena McCarthy: [00:09:45] Like Esther said, you can also have someone who was like that and it wasn't related to some of the challenges in our hospital and medical care

systems but more related to a belief her mother or her grandmother had imprinted. And it was in her and she was unaware of it and that can happen too. And so the thing is, just to say one tiny word about preparation, that's why it's so wonderful if mamas get the opportunity to be honored for what they're going through and get an opportunity to look at what their spiritual and psychological issues are coming up for them about the birth and just be honored and supported about that and given ways to to work skillfully with it.

Gena McCarthy: [00:10:38] But here we are, we were going to talk about the postpartum. So here I am, I'm a woman and I had a traumatic birth. Well, I'll give my example about part of this. Before I had my son I would get pregnant and I would have panic attacks. And the reason I was having panic attacks is because when I was born I had had a very traumatic birth, but I didn't know any of that! Well how do panic attacks work and how do trauma triggers work. You know basically you feel terrible when you're triggered. You either freeze, or you panic or you disassociate or you get really irritable and aggressive but you don't know why because it's all in your implicit memory.

Gena McCarthy: [00:11:28] So we have two kinds of memories and the awareness of this is you know happily growing nowadays we have an explicit memory which is around 2 o'clock we called each other and we got on the phone today and then the implicit memory is all the experiences we had from conception all the way, more or less, to when we're three years old and so not only, if we had a great birth experience do we have that in our implicit memory which is like our subconscious let's say, or unconscious but also we have any trauma in our implicit memory.

Gena McCarthy: [00:12:07] So if we've had sexual abuse it's in our implicit memory unless we have healed it, had the opportunity to heal it and then if we had perinatal trauma it's in our implicit memory. So now let's flash forwards. I did not really have a traumatic birth with my son but I did have some PTSD after giving birth but let's take a woman who had a traumatic birth experience and now she's postpartum. Well now her implicit memory has the memory of the trauma.

Gena McCarthy: [00:12:39] So she sees another woman who just had a baby or she hears a story or whatever and her unconsciousness gets triggered. And what triggered

means is you are flooded with the experience that it's happening to you now, even though it's not happening to you now. And so when I used to be triggered with my panic attacks and couldn't explain it, and for a lot of women when they're triggered and they can't explain it, many of us feel shame because it's like "Oh! I shouldn't be feeling this. Why am I feeling this? But I am feeling this."

So one of the things we want to educate women about is that they're having these kinds of intermittent very painful feelings, these triggers, they're not crazy and they can't explain it until they have an opportunity to heal it. And in order to heal it what needs to take place are very simple relaxing practices that can reach the implicit memory so happily no meditation, guided imagery, there's many many practices now that easily and nourishingly reach that memory.

Gena McCarthy: [00:13:54] So in my workshops, basically, I let women know what I'm aiming to communicate now, which is on the one hand I show them a chart and show them how the triggers, the painful and for many of them embarrassing triggers symptoms that they've been having, they're out of their control. It's not like you can will them to stop. And then I teach them a practice that's very simple and swift to resource themselves so their nervous system actually can calm down and feel safe again.

Gena McCarthy: [00:14:28] And I'm just gonna say where you can get information about that practice because I don't think we have the time to do it but it's very very effective. Of course anything you do calm down your nervous system will be effective but there's eight dollar tape on soundstrue.com called "tapping in" (<https://www.soundstrue.com/products/tapping-in>). And it explains in a very simple way how to do the practice and it's very simple to learn and once you do it you get so much relief from those painful triggering symptoms.

Gena McCarthy: [00:15:02] So then we kind of go over that in a simple way and then also I show them the explicit, implicit memory chart. So they really get "Oh, if I felt safe and calm I could actually get in touch with this memory and I could bring some healing to it." So then we do a very simple guided imagery practice and really the spine of this practice I got from one of my mentors and it's also available online because some

women they really need to get professional help or they need to get some form of help and then some woman really could do this visualization by themselves so I'm going to mention it and it's called Healing from a traumatic birth by Dr Gayle Petersen and you can get it for free on her website at <https://askdrgayle.com> to.

Gena McCarthy: [00:15:59] So I do a version of that guided imagery and what happens is the women in these workshops or my interns do this in one to one sessions. The woman gets to calm down. She gets to deep breathe. I should add she's already taken about five minutes to write in her journal to stimulate the memory of what she wants to work on. This doesn't heal the whole birth story, but it heals the part that's been really bothering her.

And then what she's able to do in that relaxed slower brain waves state is bring support to that memory, bring forgiveness, bring compassion, bring whatever that younger her needed. Including sometimes that younger her needs to know that she survived sometimes she's still back there thinking she's going to die. So she needs to know that too. And so it's more complicated than what I'm saying. I'm giving you the gist of it.

Gena McCarthy: [00:17:05] So then she comes back and now when you do something in a relaxed state where your brain waves actually slow down, it imprints as a memory in our brains. So she actually now has the somatic body experience. That has shifted her suffering. And this isn't something you can do in a linear conversation. It just isn't going to happen. But when you slow down and actually reach that part that's stuck in your neurobiology and you connect it, pretty much simply by compassion or support, it shifts.

Gena McCarthy: [00:17:43] So a lot of women have a lot of guilt feelings but not all women are stuck with guilt feelings. Guilt feelings, I think is the majority of how I see the pain after a trauma manifesting for a woman and then they don't have to relive the moment they're going back in this guided visualization. So they're feeling very safe in their body, very relaxed and they have a connection to that kind of objective fair witness part of our brains.

Gena McCarthy: [00:18:13] So now they're looking at their younger selves and they're seeing all the pressure she was in, everything that was happening to her. And they have a genuine feeling of compassion. They don't have to force it. It's logical. And so then they bring that to her. And then what happens for people when they heal it is they see, "Oh, I really did a great job! I was under so much pressure." And for the first time they're able to start to own some of the amazing strength and courage and full heartedness they had shown up with.

Gena McCarthy: [00:18:48] So I just want to add one more thing and then I'll take a breath for the dialogue. But the only other thing I want to add is, so what about the other woman? What's sticking them? So like you said Esther, it could be so many things. For some of them it is a belief. They heard that again. It went in when they were little girls so it's in their implicit memories that they might not be aware that it's a belief they might actually think it's a fact.

You know like all birth hurts or something scary and then for some of them it's also related to other beliefs like, "Wow! I was always strong but I didn't feel strong in this." or, "Wow I never felt strong and I wasn't strong enough in this." Or, "I never stand up for myself." And again, these are unfair judgments out of context but that is actually where different people's trauma is attached to.

And then when you slow down to do these healing practices it gets unattached and then not only does their self-esteem that they deserve to have come back but their relationship with their babies open up.

Esther Gallagher: [00:20:04] Yeah. There's a lot more spaciousness in the mind and the body for being present, being at the present moment where your baby usually is. If you're in the fourth trimester.

Gena McCarthy: [00:20:19] You know that's another really good point. Which is that babies ARE in much slower brain wave places than we are. And so when we've experienced healing then we do, we feel safer to slow down and connect with them and

listen to them because they're totally aware and have their own experience they want to share with us.

Sarah Trott: [00:20:48] It might be obvious for some women that they had trauma. Is it always obvious?

Gena McCarthy: [00:20:55] That is such a great question. I don't think so. Yeah, it's a beautiful question. I think for a lot of women, they might not know that and one of the ways you could realize that is, you know I guess I'll go back and give my own example, I didn't realize it after I gave birth to my son. What happened was-- again because at that time I didn't know everything I know now. I had healed enough to get pregnant and give birth to feel safe to you know open to that happening.

Gena McCarthy: [00:21:37] But I had not healed enough to feel safe after I gave birth. And so I went into PTSD but I didn't know it. And so I was very tense, I was very controlling, for two weeks I was very paranoid. But it wasn't like oh this is a mood disorder. And so like I would say if you find you don't really feel like you can relax, if you feel hyper vigilant, if you're not having a good time, if there's not moments--I mean I did have moments of sweetness, but a lot of the time or if you have some kind of paranoid ideation idea thoughts, get get some help. Check in.

There's a lot more awareness now of PTSD, but I do want to say a caveat to that. I've had clients who have gone to wonderful psychotherapists who are known as perinatal psychotherapists but they haven't necessarily had trauma training. So what happens is they're very well-intentioned, and they're using the skill set they have that works well for different kinds of situations, but it doesn't help with the trauma.

And often, not always, because there's this borderline I don't want to get simplistic but at any rate. So then a woman will go and she'll think well I went to therapy and I didn't get better I'm hopeless I messed up. So it's really important when a woman has trauma to send her to someone who knows how to work with trauma.

Esther Gallagher: [00:23:32] Yeah, I think it's a challenge. There are so many elements to birth and postpartum that are intrinsically interwoven and so any one symptom that a mom or a care provider might be focusing on with that person could be used as a diagnostic tool for so many possibilities. And so I think it's so important to look at the whole mom.

Gena McCarthy: [00:24:06] Yeah.

Esther Gallagher: [00:24:07] In as many aspects of what's going on as can be held on her behalf. We're not asking her to hold it all, but we're looking into, is she eating? Is she sleeping? How's breastfeeding going? Does she still hold a lot of pain in her body? In other words, how is the healing process actually going? Because if she's actually wounded and if that wound isn't actually healing a physical wound then that's the thing that needs to be addressed as well in situ along with the rest of the mom. I think it's very interesting that often that issue is sleep. And so it's like oh she can't sleep, well let's get somebody in there to take care of the baby and then she's still not sleeping. Because that's not the issue

Gena McCarthy: [00:24:07] Right. Yes.

Esther Gallagher: [00:25:11] She hasn't eaten for eight hours and she lies down to bed every night and her heart pounded because she's so angry. That's not diagnostic. That's an example. But I think that in this fourth trimester when we're talking about new moms and their needs and how trauma can be informed by many things. And that's what I liked about what you're pointing to, Gena is, that healing can take place when you are feeling supported, nourished, relaxed. That that we see to those things, we see to safety and safety is a multi-dimensional place.

Gena McCarthy: [00:25:59] You know Esther what you're saying I like also because I think it's the same thing that Sarah brought up like how do you help a woman. Because another thing that goes on, and I certainly had it when I was having all these feelings and thoughts is shame. You're like, "Oh, you know this is cool that I'm thinking this."

That you're not like dying. You kind of don't want to know yourself and you don't really want to tell other people so you really need someone who feels confident.

That's why I think the training of professionals is important too to be kind very kind and compassionate and nonjudgmental and help bridge safety into, sometimes we have some pretty painful thoughts at this time and then it's wonderful if someone can say and sometimes those thoughts are really just triggers or something painful we went through. They're not really, they're just the way our pain is manifesting, they're not really who we are or anything like that and to open the conversation.

Sarah Trott: [00:27:14] Do you have a few signs that someone can look for that might say it might be worth you might be picking up the phone and calling someone to talk to you.

Gena McCarthy: [00:27:23] Well you know there's classic symptoms triggers of trauma. First of all if you're being very hard on yourself, it's worth checking out if your if your inner critic is really taking the front seat or if you're having a lot of guilt, or if you're much harder on others than you used to be and it is hard to notice or if you're feeling really tense or hyper vigilant or if you're feeling really overwhelmed because people have different ways of experiencing it.

Gena McCarthy: [00:27:55] You know where just everything feels so overwhelming and you know you fill in the scarcity and you feel powerless, those kinds of things that suffering that can be healed. And it's very likely it's related to trauma. And then just kind of unease, anxiety never really feeling safe to relax or never really feeling-- there's the common new mother thing like, "I don't know what to do." But having that in a painful, often frequent way. So I would say it's a lot about compassion for yourself. First of all, healing can happen. And if you really feel like it's just kind of hard, everything is kind of hard. It doesn't have to be that hard. And with support it can open up and feel a lot, lot softer.

Sarah Trott: [00:28:57] I love that you're highlighting that there's hope for someone who might be feeling some of these things.

Gena McCarthy: [00:29:04] Beyond hope. And I thought maybe-- because I know our time is coming close, I'd end with a happy story about that.

Sarah Trott: [00:29:11] We would love that! Any stories or exercises you want to take us through to end would be perfect!

Gena McCarthy: [00:29:21] A little of both maybe. But yes! Just one thing is it's never too late to heal any of this. So again it is a personal example but I've used it a lot with many of my clients. My son now is 30 but when he was about 27, so three years ago, I was with a healer friend and she said, "So you had PTSD right after he was born. So, oh you were probably disassociated and you probably never had a chance to welcome him to your heart." And immediately the light bulb flashed. It was like really you know and so we both knew that I could just--I just immediately went into it. I immediately started relaxing and started to do a little guided imagery. I went right back to that moment where he was born and I welcomed him from my heart. And oh my god, you can imagine how beautiful that felt.

Gena McCarthy: [00:30:25] And then after I welcomed him and told him that I was so sorry I couldn't do it at the time because I was disassociated. But just how happy I am that he's here. What happened in our relationship, and this happens for a lot of people I've worked with, is up until then I had always had so much anxiety about my son. Is he OK will he be ok. Oh god, what's he doing now? My anxiety about my son went down from 90 percent to about 10 percent. And it was so much more fun for both of us. It Just really opened our relationship up in ways that never were possible.

Gena McCarthy: [00:31:12] And then also just saying to mama's, honoring our births whether they've been traumatic or whether they've been wonderful, is so important because when we do give birth we are in a different state of consciousness. We're in an alembic state of consciousness. And so there is a way we need to come back just like you've had a really deep yoga meditation session.

Gena McCarthy: [00:31:39] There's a way you need to gearshift back and writing it out especially to someone who really loves you whether you never send the letter but just writing the whole thing out, feeling their love for you helps so much to integrate and bring compassion to those pieces that need it or celebration and integration of your strengths.

Gena McCarthy: [00:32:04] So on that note I'll just thank everybody, for you guys for the beautiful offering you're giving, and all these mamas for their courageous journeys and may we all increase our compassion of ourselves and know healing is completely possible and good for everybody that is so wonderful of you.

Esther Gallagher: [00:32:29] Thank you. Thank you so much for coming on our show and giving your description of this very, I know from personal experience, powerful form of resource and healing. Thanks so much.

Gena McCarthy: [00:32:46] Thank you. Esther and Sarah.

Sarah Trott: [00:32:50] Thank you Gena. We really enjoyed the conversation today.

Gena McCarthy: [00:32:55] I feel mushy and happy.

Sarah Trott: [00:33:03] Well thank you everyone who's listening. We also want to take a moment to remind you once again to go to fourthtrimesterpodcast.com, sign up for our newsletter, like us on Facebook and sponsor us on Patreon. Thank you so much!

Sarah Trott: You can find out more about Esther Gallagher on <http://www.esthergallagher.com/>. You can also subscribe to this podcast in order to hear more from us. [Click here for iTunes](#) and [click here for Google Podcasts](#). Thank you for listening everyone and I hope you'll join us next time on the Fourth Trimester. The theme music on this podcast was created by Sean Trott. Hear more at <https://soundcloud.com/seantrott>. Special thanks to my true loves: my husband Ben, daughter Penelope, and baby girl Evelyn. Don't forget to share the Fourth Trimester Podcast with any new and expecting parents. I'm Sarah Trott. Goodbye for now.

