

# 6 Ways to Help

## When Breastfeeding Is Hard

So often when I answer the phone to a mom looking for breastfeeding support, somewhere in there I hear the voice-cracking and the tell-tale pauses that show she is working hard just to reach out and share her story. We are often not prepared for how hard breastfeeding can be, and the toll it can take on our hearts. We hear of the joy babies bring, the bonding, their smell, their sweetness -- maybe someone out there mentioned being really tired or not showering easily in the first weeks. We are more culturally conditioned to worry about birth than breastfeeding.

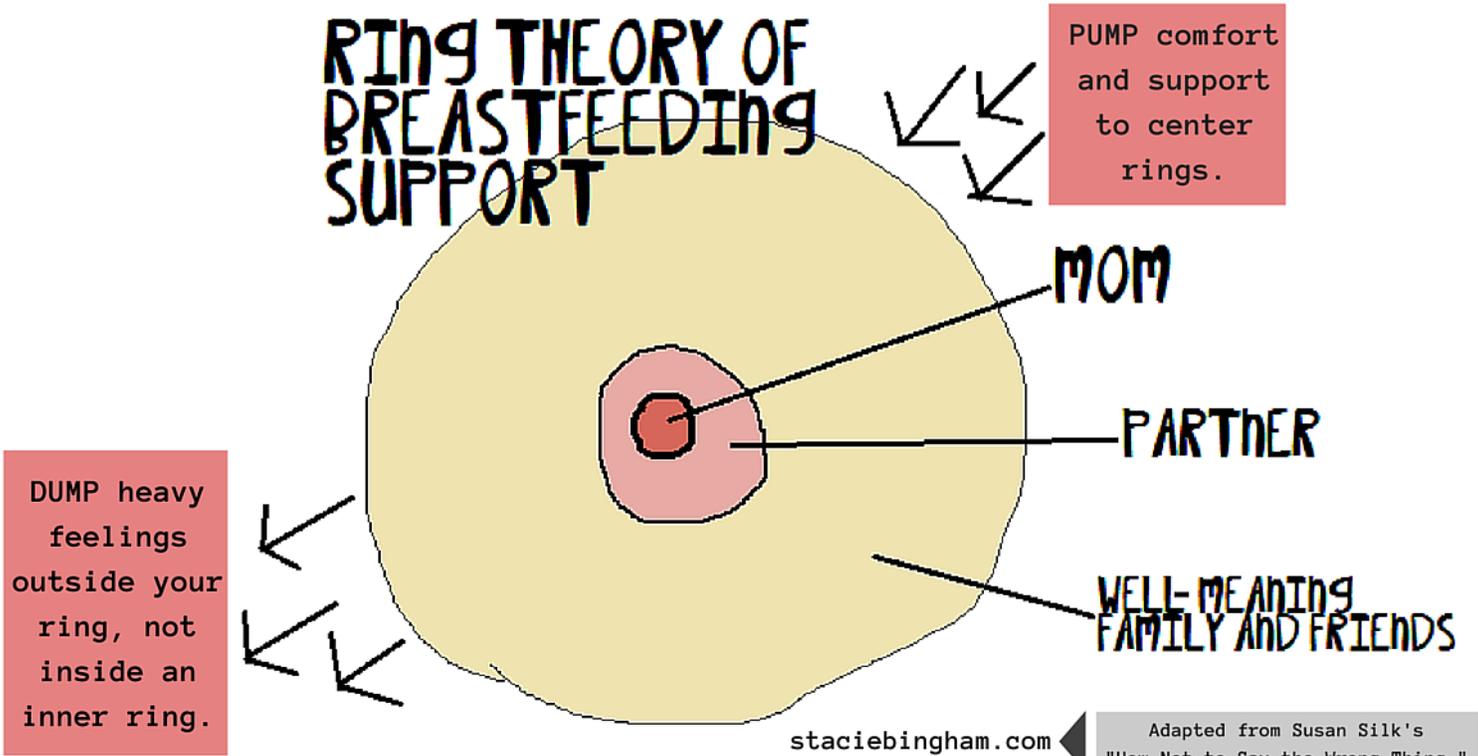


When a mom is struggling, what can we do to lift her up? What words and actions can scaffold her, infuse her with strength? I asked women to think back to what was encouraging and motivating, that anyone, not just a breastfeeding helper, could do to make the journey a little easier. Here is what they shared:

**1. "Keep the focus on me."** Many of us have had issues with breastfeeding, and often the inclination is to quickly get to our own story and how we survived. "I cracked and bled for two weeks. I didn't have enough milk so my friends gave me donor milk. I locked myself in a room and said, 'we will figure this out,' and I never gave him a drop of formula, even though my doctor suggested I was starving him -- I just powered through." This is not helpful. It isn't that on a normal day Mom can't appreciate your experience, it's just that right now, it takes away from her very-current state of being vulnerable and needing support. If you can relate, say something simple that doesn't turn the whole subject back to you, like, "I remember that." It's okay to reaffirm you have felt something similar; it's not okay to shift the focus so now you can talk about yourself. In this moment, it needs to be all about Mom and Baby. It takes acute awareness to stay in the present with her, and this truly is your gift to give.

**What is not helpful:** Launching into your own tale of triumph, terror, or failure, especially with the intent of showing Mom you had it worse; the same holds true if you feel compelled to share your grief, your anger, or what you would do. Apply Susan Silk's "Ring Theory," which I have adapted. The idea is, the person facing the crisis (Mom) has the center spot. She is allowed to say whatever she wants or needs to, to anyone else. As the rings extend, others are assigned positions according to how close they are to the center. So Mom's partner is next. Again, he or she is allowed to vent in an outward fashion. Family and friends will have their own feelings, and it is appropriate to dump those outward as well. Advising, sharing your worries or coping methods, explaining your exasperation with the situation, etc., is never done inwardly, because this adds to the load of those dealing most directly with the crisis.

# RING THEORY OF BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT



**2. "Use those active listening skills we hear about."** Rephrase what she says: "It sounds like you are scared that breastfeeding is not going to work." By restating what you heard, you aren't going to tell her something she doesn't already know, and it lets her know you heard her. If it isn't what she's feeling, she can clarify by offering more information: "No, I feel like it is working, I just think maybe it will never end up being a smooth, easy process, like I imagined." It's okay if you don't get it right -- she will understand you are trying to listen to her feelings. Acknowledge her struggle -- you can never go wrong by saying something like, "I see how hard you are working." Don't ever underestimate the therapeutic power of being a good listener.

**What is not helpful:** "Maybe it's not meant to be." "Haven't you tried hard enough?" "Formula/ bottles are here for a reason." "Your cousin Jill wasn't able to breastfeed, and everything turned out fine for her."

**3. "Don't be afraid to touch me."** When the dam holding back the tears and feelings breaks, she can feel cracked open and raw, and having an audience can make those feelings even worse. You can touch her shoulder, take her hand, or offer the comfort of a hug. Sometimes touch can give more solid support than any words can. When a baby cries, he is letting us know he needs something, and that gives us the opportunity to respond and help him feel better. When adults cry, there is the same opportunity to help someone feel better while also creating a bond of love or friendship. You may not know what to say when you see her like that, but you can't go wrong by showing her physically that you care.

**What is not helpful:** Staring at her, pretending she's not showing emotion, visibly looking uncomfortable, or telling her not to cry.

**4. "Share in the loss I am experiencing."** Whether breastfeeding will ever work for Mom and Baby, in the middle of the crisis, it is a loss -- a loss of hopes, a loss of dreams, a loss of what she thought would be an "easy and natural" way to feed her baby. It is okay to treat this as any loss a friend might face. This isn't the same as having two choices for dinner -- chicken and rice, or beef and potatoes -- and then having the choice made for you. Breastfeeding comes with many overwhelming emotions. When she feels like she can't feed her baby, in that moment there is nothing that can feel worse, and it feels like loss. We can accept and value that, even if we can't understand it.

**What is not helpful:** "It could be worse." "At least you have a healthy baby." "I don't understand why this is affecting you so much, it's not like someone died."

**5. "Let me decide when I am done."** Well-meaning friends and relatives who are concerned about Mom's physical and emotional well-being may try to convince her that she's worked hard enough. Mom is the only one who can judge that -- she knows her options. Wait for her to tell you where she is in this journey. One woman, a neurologist, shared: "If you say you are suicidal, people don't say, 'yeah...you should probably just go ahead...'. They figure out how to help you, they talk you off the ledge." It obviously isn't the same thing, but in the storm of hormones, emotions, life changes, and struggles, the very-real feelings of hopelessness and loss of control can be strong and similar. Keep encouraging her. This is her marathon to run -- she decides the pace, the route, when to take a break, or even when to stop -- you cheer her on from the side no matter where she is in that loop, no matter how you are feeling about her situation. As another woman put it: "It's cruel to try to take someone's hope away."

**What is not helpful:** "It's unlikely by this age your baby is going to figure out how to breastfeed." "Just try X, Y, or Z -- it fixed our issues." "Not everyone can breastfeed." "I just can't bear seeing you so upset."

**6. "Do something for me that will save me from having to do it myself."** Rabbi Harold Kushner is the author of, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." When asked to share what he's learned in his years supporting people in the midst of suffering, he said it could all be summed up in this statement: "Show up and shut up." Anything you can do for Mom that gives her more time to be with her baby and concentrate on self-help and healing, is priceless -- and ANYONE can help. "My husband has always been supportive. He always left it up to me to decide what I wanted to do. And when I decided I wanted to continue to try, he helped me pack up the baby and drove me to LC's and LLL several times a week. He washes bottles and pump parts, he's a pro at freezing, thawing, making bottles, hooking up my pump. His labor of love is so important at continuing exclusive pumping, because I alone have logged about 3,000 hours of work towards pumping and pumping-related activities for the first year of my baby's life." Further out of the ring, family and friends can take care of pets or outside responsibilities, bring meals or snacks, run errands, make phone calls, drive Mom and Baby to appointments, and always, always there is housework and laundry.

Ronald A. Rasband shared: "If you come upon a person who is drowning, would you ask if they need help --or would it be better to just jump in and save them from the deepening waters? The offer, while well-meaning and often given, 'Let me know if I can help,' is really no help at all." It can take energy,

effort, and humility for a person to list what she could use help with. In the movie, "Robots," one of the characters, Bigweld, had the motto: "See a need, fill a need." Jump in and do what you can -- when there seems to be nothing else, there is always service.

**What is not helpful:** Service with conditions; making the job seem too complicated to take on, or making it too complicated for Mom to delegate; rushing in to offer baby care when Mom and Baby could be bonding; **expecting a thank-you card.**

Society says feeling bad when breastfeeding is hard is not appropriate or okay. We don't want to make anyone feel bad if they can't breastfeed, so when a woman struggles to continue, her hard work is not always encouraged or even noticed. To really help, though, we need to suspend this judgement and be willing to accept her feelings and her reality. Becky Bailey writes: "Acceptance means recognizing that people, situations, and events are what they are. Each moment simply is as it is. Acceptance doesn't mean that we approve of the moment, only that we recognize that what is happening at a certain moment is, in fact, happening."

Two women in particular said they couldn't remember anything helpful or hopeful that was said to them. This lack of acceptance is apparent when they shared what they wished they had been told:

"This is the hardest thing you will ever do, but you will get through it. You are getting through it. One day at a time. You are amazing and strong and this will be worth it. It does matter."

"I support you and will be here to help you if you decide to keep trying or you want to stop. I value you and think highly of you as a mother and person, no matter your decision."

Accept her struggle. Accept her feelings. Open yourself to her reality and you increase her willingness to accept your help. When she comes out the other side (whatever that other side looks like), it can be with positive memories of the support and care that was shown to her and her baby.

References:

Becky Bailey, "Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline"

Ronald A. Rasband, "Special Lessons"

Susan Silk and Barry Goldman, "How Not to Say the Wrong Thing"