

My Path to Healing: A Mother's Journey of Self-Discovery and Transformation

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My name is Kellie Natoli. I have always had a thirst for learning and growing. At age ten, I discovered gardening through a teacher and have been fascinated ever since. I consider myself an intuitive person who enjoys other cultures. Over the years, I have had various experiences, from working as an olive harvester in Italy, teaching in Chile, and providing tech support for a financial software company. Currently, I work in marketing for a garden center in Northern California. I am happily married to my husband of 12 years, and we have two darling daughters, a cat and a fish.

Nine years ago, my life changed as I became a mother. I was completely unprepared for the journey ahead, and I experienced a traumatic childbirth, struggled with postpartum depression and anxiety, and had a disconnected relationship with my daughter. Since then, I have had another child and have been fighting to find a new path. I share my birth journey in this paper because I believe that mothers and their stories matter. I hope my story might provide insight to mothers and practitioners. Especially those who feel they are searching for answers. It is organized in a timeline format where I describe my attempts at repairing the trauma. I end by touching on which treatments helped me, my conclusions, and my considerations for the future of perinatal care.

My Journey Timeline

In December 2013, I discovered I was pregnant with a due date of August 11, 2014.

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August 20, 2014

11:00 a.m.: I had an appointment with my doctor, where I got my membranes stripped.

6:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m.: I started prodromal labor and went to the hospital.

Midnight: We were sent home from the hospital. My cervix dilated to two centimeters. I needed to be at three centimeters.

August 21, 2014

Midnight- 6:00 a.m.: I labored at home and experienced intense pain without respite. We tried to sleep. My husband went into the other room. I was alone for several hours. Contractions were maintained at five-minute intervals.

6:30 a.m.: I was admitted to the hospital at barely three centimeters.

7:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.: I was given narcotics for sleep. I did not want drug interventions, but I had no stamina after my long and painful night.

10:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.: I received Pitocin without pain medication. I experienced little progression. I was still at three centimeters and felt like I was being tortured. This was traumatic for me.

3 p.m.: I was given an epidural and experienced relief from pain—my first reprieve from pain in nearly twenty-four hours.

3-7 p.m.: I progressed from three centimeters to nine centimeters.

7:30 p.m.: I started pushing.

8:30 p.m.: Pushing stopped. My water hadn't broken yet.

10:30 p.m.: Pushing commenced again.

11:30 p.m.: My baby was nearly born. The cord was wrapped around my baby's neck. The doctor performed an episiotomy for an efficient delivery. My baby didn't cough or cry. Medical staff rushed into the room. Staff used suction to remove fluid from the baby's airway. Baby breathed and after the nurses checked her, I held her. I felt physically and emotionally overwhelmed by the birth.

August 22-24, 2014

In the hospital, the baby seemed extremely alert. Not the sleepy newborn I expected. I struggled to nurse the baby.

August 25, 2014

Baby's first checkup. The pediatrician said he had not seen a baby this alert in a long time.

August 28, 2014 and subsequent times

I sought lactation help from the clinic and was diagnosed with an overactive letdown.

September 1, 2014

My baby begins crying most evenings for several hours.

September 12, 2014

Baby's three-week checkup. I told the pediatrician about the crying. He stated that four nights of crying for more than four hours at a time was considered colic. The pediatrician said, "There is nothing you can do."

September 20, 2014

We got a second opinion from a different pediatrician. The doctor delivered a similar diagnosis. It was colic or acid reflux. This doctor offered an improved bedside manner with calm and compassion. Zantac was prescribed as an option for acid reflux.

September 21—November 2014

I struggled daily with breastfeeding. My baby had difficulty sleeping and eating and exhibited signs of colic. I sought continued lactation help. The baby was hyper-alert.

December 2014—April 2015

Overactive letdown continued. I found lying down while nursing helpful and continued breastfeeding. My baby's naps were generally twenty to thirty minutes. I was exhausted. My family lived far away, and I had little outside help.

April 15, 2015

We went on a family trip where we introduced solid foods. The baby took her first two-hour nap. While on the trip, I discussed my new life as a mother with my mentor. My mentor was my college professor and had overcome adversity in her own life. I discovered I was suffering from postpartum

depression. My mentor suggested I include daily exercise in my routine. She stated it was as or more effective than any pill to combat depression.

May 2015

We forgot to give a dose of Zantac in the morning. By the afternoon, we realized the baby was okay. We discontinued Zantac.

July 2015

I introduced formula feeding. My baby started sleeping through the night. Until then, the baby would wake me at least once nightly.

August 2015

My baby turned one.

September 2015—August 2016

I worked part-time. Ten hours a week but mostly remained a stay-at-home parent. I struggled with my daughter. I felt stressed, alone, and disconnected from my daughter. I was unable to help my child during stressful moments. There were long tantrums most days. I started experiencing panic and anxiety when I drove long distances.

September 2016

I sought psychological therapy. I wanted more children but felt afraid of another difficult birth. The therapist helped me sift through my fears. I felt confident enough to try getting pregnant.

December 2016

I discovered I was pregnant.

August 2017

I gave birth to my second daughter and had an improved birth experience. This, in part, was due to a better connection with my doctor, other physicians in the practice, and a continuity of care. My obstetrician didn't deliver me, but he displayed the utmost confidence in the care I would receive from his colleagues whom I had met. With my first daughter, I was part of a huge medical system. There was no continuity of care as I experienced during my second birth.

Second Birth

August 28, 2017

3:00 a.m.: My water broke.

4:00 a.m.: I was admitted to the hospital ten days past due. Contractions were five minutes apart.

7:00 a.m.: I received an epidural.

8:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.: I progressed from two to nine centimeters.

1:00 p.m.: Ten minutes of pushing, and my baby was born. I held my baby in my arms immediately.

September 2017

I had an improved experience nursing, and this baby was easily soothed. Relational challenges with my first daughter remained. The first child, at age three, still showed sensitivity to her physical environment. Our attachment felt insecure.

September 2018

My baby was sleeping through the night. I experienced insomnia. I continued feeling a lingering sadness over the ruptured relationship with my first daughter. I was experiencing anxiety when driving long distances. I confided in a few close friends.

September 2019

My first daughter started kindergarten. Our relational difficulty continued. My child was sensitive to her environment. After I took her to the dentist, for example, she melted to the ground from her chair. She could not tolerate someone putting their hands in or near her mouth. She squirmed like a worm. Why? That year, I asked the kindergarten teacher, “Do you think she might be on the autism spectrum?” The teacher assured me after many years of teaching children, my daughter wasn’t on the spectrum. I still had no answers to the question, “Why is there constant relational and sensory adversity with my firstborn daughter?”

April 2020

I continued with physical issues in my body. Beyond insomnia, I started having unexplainable rashes, IBS-like digestive issues, extreme fatigue, and headaches. This reached a tipping point, and I realized I needed support.

Concluding this section of my story, I often felt stressed, alone, and disconnected. Why was my baby so alert from day one? Was her central nervous system in shock like mine? Was she also reeling from the stress of birth? There were glimmers of hope when I received attuned care from a postpartum nurse, the new pediatrician, or when my mentor helped identify that I had postpartum depression. But far and away, I felt hopeless and helpless in my new life as a mother. I wanted to be on a different path. My mind, body, and emotions felt dysregulated. Were there tools to deal with my circumstances?

Treatment That Helped

I found tools from a functional medicine doctor who helped bring calm to my physical body. Later, I met an attuned therapist who calmed my nervous system, mind, and emotions. These are described below.

November 2020

I met with a functional medicine doctor. He suggested an anti-inflammatory diet for six months based on my symptoms and blood work. He also noticed autoimmunity markers of the thyroid. My numbers were reaching Hashimoto's Disease levels if left untreated. He provided digestive support, nervous system support, and supplementation for my overall immune system health.

April 2021

I showed incredible improvement after six months of a gluten- and dairy-free diet and thoughtful supplementation. My thyroid antibodies dropped by four hundred points. My life changed. I was sleeping again, my digestive health improved, my headaches stopped, and I had energy. My mood improved, and I noticed inflammation was dissipating.

July 2021

Although time had passed, and I had a successful second pregnancy and birth, I still felt helpless with my first daughter. She would face adversity like sharing a toy, a change of plans, a loud sensory experience, or frustration and be unable to have a large enough window of tolerance to move through the adversity and discomfort. Describing the day's events, I told my husband in a

frustrated and angry tone, “I wish she had more resilience!” At that point, I learned that a child’s regulation begins with the parent. It looked like I was the one who needed more regulation and resilience.

September 2021

I had my third meeting with the functional medicine doctor and showed continued improvement. He noticed I could benefit from central nervous system support. He sensed the underlying stress in my demeanor and body.

October 2021

I found a new therapist. This therapist had experience in trauma, EMDR, brain-spotting, and attachment. She was also a mother with three children. During a therapy session, I shared a recent story about my daughter. I shared about our difficulty with even simple daily routines. The recent challenge was putting on soccer cleats, shin guards, and socks. I described how this event left us both dysregulated and in tears. I asked my therapist, “What else can I do when we are in this place?” The therapist carefully listened to the story. She calmly suggested next time I do the following: “Take a deep breath, touch your daughter’s hand, look her in the eye, and say in a calm and quiet voice, “What is it you need?” That phrase became oxygen to me.

December 2021

I continued therapy. After sharing my birth story with my therapist, I began to feel empathy for that young mother. I started healing in my mind and heart. After seven years of struggle, I felt like I was crawling out of a dark pit and could see the light. We tried brainspotting during a therapy session. My therapist introduced me to the Eight C’s of Self Leadership from the IFS therapy model. Within the IFS framework, Dr. Richard Swartz identifies the eight Cs as confidence, calmness, creativity, clarity, curiosity, courage, compassion, and connectedness (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020).

January 2022

I was still battling feelings of helplessness with my older daughter. Our family went on a trip. I felt shame about getting frustrated at my daughter while working together on schoolwork. I had learned the eight C’s but hadn’t internalized them.

February 1, 2022

On the last day of our family trip, we went to Disneyland. My husband was supposed to be the one waiting in line. But somehow found myself in line for Thunder Mountain with my older daughter. My daughter was hesitant about going on the ride. I felt panic. The helpless feelings were flooding back. However, this time, I remembered the important question. “What is it you need?” I put myself in my daughter’s shoes. I realized my daughter was feeling scared. My daughter needed reassurance. I was able to stay confident, courageous, and calm. I grew up close to Disneyland and had been on that ride a hundred times. I became a storyteller. I recounted how when I was growing up it was my favorite ride! We went on the ride together successfully. My child was delighted and asked to go again with my husband. I felt a sense of relief and pride that I had never felt with my older daughter. I assumed the role of a reassuring mother who could confidently stay with her through adversity.

February 2, 2022

The next day, we drove home from Disneyland. I volunteered to drive for two hours on a large and crowded highway. The conditions were windy, and tumbleweeds flew toward us on the highway. I confidently drove the car without experiencing anxiety or panic. This was the first time I remembered driving without panic in over six years.

March 2022—July 2022

I continued therapy. I read helpful books, wrote in a journal, learned about attachment theory, and gained tools. I continued to grow. My daughter continued to grow. Our bond grew stronger roots.

July 2022

My daughter attended a summer camp at an accredited STAR institute specializing in sensory integration. I gathered additional tools for calming inevitable emotional storms. The therapists taught me how staying creative and playful was a superpower. It was nearly impossible to be dysregulated while playing and creating. This became another important tool in my tool belt. There was continued improvement but also sometimes setbacks relationally. I felt ashamed when I failed.

August—October 2022

We went on a family trip by the ocean, and I noticed surfers. They showed many qualities of the 8 C's of self-leadership from the IFS model. I imagined surfers after a surfing session. Did I think they spent their whole time talking about their wipeouts? Did they berate themselves for not paddling enough to catch that one wave? I didn't think so. I believed they talked about their best waves of the day, their triumphs. I believed they didn't dwell on the noise of failure. I believed surfers used calmness, creativity, curiosity, confidence, courage, and compassion. They exhibited these behaviors toward themselves while they were surfing and after as they talked about their waves. I realized I wanted to be more like a surfer in my approach to my relationship with my daughter and the many wipeouts I experienced.

October 2022—Present

I continue therapy. I have found continued repair in my relationship with my older daughter. There are setbacks, but I now have a more secure attachment with my daughter. I now have tools for regulation and repair. I have changed my path to one where we are no longer helpless but confident and excited to walk together, as it should have been from the beginning.

I was on a path I didn't want to be on. Many mothers are. I had no tools to get on a different path. I needed outside sources of support. "What is it you need?" was my trajectory-changing question. Practitioners should ask patients that question. When you ask, "What is it you need?" you are seeing the person in non-judgmental awareness. You are open to a honest answer.

Secondly, at times, our physical bodies need rebalancing. This notion is not valued in Western medicine. I think our bodies need attention and nourishment, especially after a difficult childbirth. How can we integrate the body into the healing process in mainstream care?

After receiving tools and treatment from two compassionate practitioners, I could access a new way. I am grateful I had the opportunity to experience attunement and healing personally. My desire is to be a beacon of hope for any mother who finds herself on a road of disconnection with herself or her child. Things can get better. I hope practitioners might consider integrating this important question, "What is it you need?" Even if, on paper, the patient's story does not seem traumatic, the story may feel traumatic and triggering to the patient. Their feelings are real; practitioners can help validate their experience and pull them back into the light.

References

Schwartz, R. C., & Sweezy, M. (2020). *Internal family systems therapy* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.