

The Prenatal and Perinatal History *A Vital Component of Effective Holistic Practice*

By Wendy Anne McCarty, PhD, RN



Recently I presented a workshop, *Working with Preverbal Issues At Any Age Utilizing Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)*, at the Association of Comprehensive Energy Psychology (ACEP) Conference. Many of the attendees were seasoned holistic practitioners. I asked how many people had training to assess and work with adult clients' childhood-related issues. Nearly everyone in the room raised their hands. I then asked how many had training for infancy-related issues? The number dropped to about one in three. When I asked how many had training to assess and work with adult issues anchored in prenatal and perinatal experience only a few hands remained raised, less than 10% of those present.

During the late 20th century, the focus moved from "childhood" to the first three years of postnatal life, "zero-to-three," as the critical period in which life-long patterns were set in motion. With this evolving focus on infancy, professionals began obtaining more training in infant mental health, developmental neuroscience, attachment, and early trauma to better work with clients of all ages.

Leading-edge understandings from prenatal and perinatal psychology and related fields, such as biodynamic embryology, epigenetics, and noetic sciences, roll back the primary critical period of development from infancy and early childhood to the earliest developmental period—pre-conception through baby's first postnatal year. Newborns already portray established beliefs and ways of being in the world (McCarty, 2002). As Marti Glenn, PhD and I suggest in our 2008 position paper, "The difference between thriving and surviving begins in the womb" (McCarty & Glenn, p. 121).

For the past 25 years, I have educated professionals in prenatal and perinatal psychology. I have found that the

potential connection between their clients' current therapeutic issues and their prenatal and perinatal experience is often a rather mysterious terrain for most practitioners. More practitioners now recognize that these early experiences are important and have appreciation for "prenatal stress" and "birth trauma" as significant, but fewer feel confident to systematically identify, assess, and work with this developmental period and its long-term repercussions in their practice.

Most therapist training and graduate programs do not teach how to effectively identify these early developmental influences or recognize the potential pre- and perinatal anchors for current issues. Nor do they teach the specific skills needed to address these early-rooted issues. I believe effectively working with prenatal and perinatal issues is leading-edge territory that can elegantly help clients heal and move into more integrated, coherent wholeness at any age.

I co-founded the first graduate degrees in prenatal and perinatal psychology (PPN) and was founding chair and



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core faculty of the PPN program at the former Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. In our PPN courses, therapists-in-training learned how to take a prenatal and perinatal history at various life stages as a vital component in effectively assessing and working with issues anchored in the clients' prenatal and perinatal experience. In this article I share with you, from my own practice, my steps to obtain a prenatal and perinatal history, a few tips about the history, and a prenatal and perinatal history/inventory I use with adult clients.

I am also a developmental theorist and recommend reading *Welcoming Consciousness*. In this text I build a consciousness-based early development model that reflects the expanded PPN understanding of babies during this early developmental period (2004, 2012). This text served as a primary textbook for our graduate students and provides an orientation to this developmental landscape through the lens of prenatal and perinatal psychology. It gives you a context for recognizing significant PPN-anchored issues in your practice and benefiting from the information you obtain in a prenatal and perinatal history.

My Practice: Tips On Taking a Prenatal and Perinatal History

I have worked with babies, children, families and adults on patterns rooted in their prenatal and perinatal experience since 1989, as an OB nurse, marriage and family therapist, prenatal and birth therapist, and now holistic consultant. Currently I have a global phone/Skype PPN-oriented consultation

practice for families and adults. In my practice, I have gone through many different methods of obtaining information about the client's own prenatal and perinatal experience or that of their child. For those of you who may be newer to this material or clinical practice, I offer this description of how I incorporate taking a prenatal and perinatal history into my practice.

When someone requests a consultation with me, I first email them an intake form that describes my practice's holistic orientation and prenatal and perinatal and energy psychology emphasis, my scope of practice, and what they can expect. I ask them for a brief statement of what they want help with.

When I receive their completed intake form we set up our first appointment with the understanding that I will email them an *in-depth history and current issues inventory* (see page 111), to complete on their computer prior to our first session. I tell them I will read it before the session and by doing so, I will come to their first session with a more comprehensive understanding and context for addressing their concerns. I have several customized *history/current issue inventories* for use during the pregnancy, postnatal and infancy periods, as well as for children and adults, with variations for special circumstances, such as adoption.

I find several benefits of having a client's written in-depth history/inventory prior to the first session. I schedule the hour prior to their first session to read their history. As I read

their material, I purposefully move into a quiet, intuitive state and use their history as a way of sensing the fields of information and being of this individual or family, and the underlying themes and patterns. I am then primed during the first session to relate more to the whole person and their life circumstances than if I were getting pieces of information along the way.

Having this information written by the client also reduces the focus on history taking and recording during the session. If it is a parent and child session, the parent has already completed the history at their computer. This way I have a wealth of historical and current-issue information without triggering their child by discussing more of this information during the session. It allows us to use the session to address and discuss the specific aspect of the issue that is the appropriate focus with the child that day.

Another benefit of asking the client to complete the prenatal and perinatal history is that they already see that you value their earliest experiences. They very well might not have considered this early period as significant to their current issues or patterns. Not only is it cueing their conscious focus, but it is also cueing the prenatal and perinatal experience as significant to their subconscious and autonomic system as well—to their whole consciousness and somatic system.

Clients often tell me that they enjoyed the process of completing the history/inventory and found it a

positive, self-reflecting experience. Clients who may have never considered their own prenatal and perinatal period already have more awareness, memories or connections to current issues as we begin the first session together after completing the history/inventory. It may also have opened up a dialogue with their own parents about their mother's pregnancy and their birth in the process of completing the history. And lastly, clients also like being able to complete it over a period of days, with pauses to ponder things or to fit it into their busy life.

So many times in my earlier pre- and perinatal- oriented practice when I did not take a thorough history/ current issue inventory prior to the first session, I later wished I had for a variety of reasons. Thus 15 years ago, I decided to obtain more information right from the start. With this said, there are times for caution with taking an in-depth early history prior to the first visit. For some people, the history can feel like too much if they are ill or exhausted. It may trigger too much material for them to process on their own prior to the session. I work with fairly resourced people and only rarely do I have someone who is overwhelmed with the process. If I sense from their intake form that a client may not be adequately resourced to have the history/inventory be a positive, self-reflective experience, then I recommend we meet first and see what is appropriate. It is important to be sensitive to the power of bringing attention to the prenatal and perinatal period and assess how to proceed. In some cases, you may want to meet with the client for the initial visit and then ask them to complete the history/inventory between visits or to do this within the sessions.

The prenatal and perinatal history is a vital component of effective holistic practice. Current life issues are often a direct reflection of early unmet needs, trauma, unfinished stories, or life-limiting beliefs and patterns rooted in their prenatal or perinatal experience. Even if the current issue does not appear to be directly related to the prenatal and perinatal period, it is being held and processed within the context of imprinted beliefs and patterns developed during this period.

As a practitioner, if the prenatal and perinatal period is not as familiar to you as childhood or infancy, I do recommend obtaining training to increase your effectiveness in identifying, assessing, and working with prenatal and perinatal issues. Adding the prenatal and perinatal history in your practice now will help you build your awareness and understanding of how your clients' earliest experiences may be an integral part of their current issues and ways of dealing with those issues. On the following page, you will find the prenatal and perinatal history I ask adult clients to complete. This history is an excerpt from my adult history/inventory that

also includes sections for childhood, adolescence, adulthood, current life, and a checklist of potential current issues/patterns that are known to be associated with the prenatal and perinatal period. The history normally is formatted to be completed on the computer, and thus room for responses and comments are normally expandable. You have permission to use this history in your practice. For teaching or writing purposes, please use proper citation of its origins.

Wendy Anne McCarty, PhD, RN, HBN-BC, DCEP, is a world leader in prenatal and perinatal psychology. She is the author of *Welcoming Consciousness*, an innovative consciousness-based early development model, now available in English, German, Portuguese, and Spanish. She was co-founder/co-author/program chair and faculty of the first graduate degree programs in prenatal and perinatal psychology at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. Her leading-edge work brings together prenatal and perinatal psychology, a multidimensional early development lens, consciousness studies, energy psychology healing modalities, holistic nursing, and her intuitive perception. As an international presenter, educator and consultant, she guides professionals and organizations to incorporate these pioneering findings, principles and practices. She brings expertise from her 40 years of professional work with individuals and families as an obstetrical nurse, childbirth educator, marriage and family therapist, and prenatal and birth therapist working with babies, children and families, as well as her current holistic consultation practice for families, professionals, and organizations. Dr. McCarty also co-founded BEBA, a non-profit clinic providing prenatal and birth oriented therapeutic support for babies and parents, and was the director of Natural Family Living~Right From the Start, an organizational community to support human potential from the beginning of life. Contact her at drwmccarty@gmail.com, [facebook/wendyanne.mccarty](#), and www.wondrousbeginnings.com

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Dr. Wendy Anne McCarty's Prenatal and Perinatal History – Adult Questionnaire

This document is formatted for you to complete on your computer. **You can answer each question or read the questions of a section and address them together as a summary response for the section.**

I hope it is a positive experience of self-reflection. You may find you discover patterns or things that you had not put together before. I ask about your parents, your conception, prenatal, birth and bonding period, and infancy and continue from there. I ask questions about you in your current life and what you would like help with through our work together.

If you have memories, or have addressed your prenatal and perinatal experiences in your previous healing/growth work, please briefly include these in your comments.

Brief responses are best. Just naming something is often enough. I ask a lot of questions here. We can always explore the subject more in our session. If you find yourself too stressed by completing the history, don't push yourself. Let me know.

Email your completed history to me and I will read it prior to our first session together.
Thank you.

Parent's Background:

Mother's:

- Prenatal/birth and significant life stories—anything that has intensity to it—or events/situations that significantly shaped her life:
- Previous losses, abuse, unresolved conflicts:
- Conditions, illnesses, addictions:

Comments:

Father's:

- Prenatal/birth and significant life stories—anything that has intensity to it—or events/situations that significantly shaped his life:
- Previous losses, abuse, unresolved conflicts:
- Conditions, illnesses, addictions:

Comments:

- Any other important intergenerational or familial history of traumatic loss, abuse, events, or patterns that you want to include:

Comments:

Before and Around the Time of Your Conception

- What was your parent's relationship like? Significant patterns, issues or relationships going on at the time? World events and life situation?
- Your mother's history: previous infertility issues, miscarriages, abortions, pregnancies, births, or post partum depression? Was there anything unresolved or traumatic?
- Previous children—your siblings:

Comments:

Conception and Discovery

- Were your parents trying to have a baby and why?
- What was going on in their life and relationship at the time of your conception?
- What were the circumstances and emotional tone of the conception? Were drugs, alcohol, or tobacco involved?
- Were medical interventions or alternative means for conception and pregnancy used? IVF, donor, surrogate?
- What were your parents' initial reactions to realizing your mom was pregnant with you?
- Did it bring up joy, excitement, shame, conflict? What were other's reactions?
- What were you told and what did you feel? Was your birth planned? A surprise or shock? Were you wanted?
- Did they consider not having/keeping you? Was there an attempt made to abort the pregnancy?
- Did they think about, plan, and/or decide to give you up for adoption?

Comments:

Life in the Womb

- What stories did you hear about when your mom was pregnant with you?
- Were there previously unresolved issues involving her womb---sexual abuse, miscarriage, abortions, disappointments?
- How did your mother feel towards the growing baby inside?
- Did your mom smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, or was she on medications?
- Were there environmental situations? Nutritional/medical issues?
- Was this a stressful or a great time in their life? What was your mother's emotional health?
- What was your parents' relationship like during this time? Supportive? Conflicted? Significant events or issues?
- Were there significant cultural/historical events taking place?

Comments:

Birth

- What have you been told about your birth?
- What messages did you get about your birth?
- Were you born early or late for your due date?
- When and how did labor start? Naturally or induced?
- How long was the labor?
- How did your mother/father feel about it? (Supported? Alone? Rushed? Scared? Wonderful? Unresolved issues?)
- What do you know about the labor?
- Were you born at home or in the hospital?
- Were drugs used? During labor? For delivery? (Pain medications; anesthesia) What kind?
- Were there medical interventions? Forceps? Vacuum extraction? C-Section?
- Your birth weight?
- Did you or your mother have complications during labor or birth?

Comments:

Bonding and Newborn Period

- What happened when you were first born?
- Was your cord cut immediately?
- Were procedures done right away or were you given to mom?
- If you were separated from mom, for how long?
- Any complications/medical interventions needed for you or your mother?
- If in the hospital, were you with mom or in a nursery?
- Were you cared for in an NICU? If so, for how long and for what medical reason?
- Were you breast or bottle-fed?
- Were you circumcised? If so, when? Was an anesthetic used?
- How did your parents describe you as a newborn?
- Did you have bruising or molding of your head?
- What did your parents or others tell you about this period?
- Were there any unusual circumstances or interpersonal dynamics surrounding your birth and newborn period?

Comments:

As a Baby

- What have you been told about your first weeks and months?
- Do you have your own memories?
- Were you breast-fed or bottle-fed? Any nursing, digestive issues?
- Did you have problems? E.g. cried a lot, ear infections, hard to fall asleep, colic, etc.
- Did you sleep with your parents or in separate room?
- What “parenting practices” or advice did your parents practice?
- Would they comfort you or try to let you cry it out?
- Who cared for you? If you had other caretakers, how many?

As a Baby

- Did you go to a group care situation if mother worked?
- Did your mom experience post partum depression?
- Did you have any physical, medical, or developmental issues?
- Any other significant aspects of your life in the womb, birth, and infancy you want to mention?
- Any other significant early memories from preconception through infancy?

Comments:



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