

THE *List.*

The untold truth of surrogacy (according to a surrogate)



J Lynn Photography / Crystal Henry @CHenryWrites

Although the process of in vitro fertilization has been around since the late 1970s, the idea of creating a life in a lab rather than the backseat of a Camaro is still a bit controversial. Add a surrogate into the mix, and some people really give the side-eye.

A quick search for surrogacy horror stories will turn up a plethora of tales about parents abandoning babies or demanding termination, and surrogates keeping babies and getting child support. The sad fact is tension, tragedy and turmoil gets the page views, and grisly gossip is sometimes so much more juicy than reality.

However, the real world of gestational surrogacy just isn't all that horrifying. As someone who has actually carried a baby for another couple, I can assure you that gestational surrogacy has its fair share of tears, drama and tension. It's just not the same kind of mayhem some people would have you believe. For most surrogates and intended parents it's a beautiful life-changing journey. This is the untold truth of gestational surrogacy.

Surrogates don't get pregnant the old fashioned way



Stef Finley

This should be clear to most people, but you'd be surprised how many folks actually thought Marvin Gaye was playing when I got pregnant with my surro baby. Surrogates do not get down and dirty with the daddy in order to get pregnant.

Depending on whether the woman is a gestational or traditional surrogate, she either went through in vitro fertilization or artificial insemination. Since surrogates carry for gay couples, straight couples, single mothers and single fathers, there are many different routes to creating a surrogate baby. However going down to pound town with an intended father is not one of them.

There are plenty of women who get pregnant with another man's baby. But in the case of a surrogate, the active parties in the room were a doctor, a nurse, the baby's intended father (or fathers), the intended mother (or mothers) and sometimes the surrogates own husband (or wife) as well. Even though the surrogate has her pants off, the people who assist in the magic of impregnating her are there for business, not pleasure.

Gestational vs. traditional



Jessica Pretz

It's probably best to clear up exactly what types of surrogates are out there. There are two types: gestational and traditional.

A gestational surrogate is a woman who undergoes IVF with an embryo that is not hers. She typically thickens her uterine lining and suppresses her ovaries using a combination of shots and pills, but the baby that is implanted in her womb does not share her DNA. The egg and sperm either belong to the baby's parents, or they belong to an egg or sperm donor. It's like bringing the ingredients for your grandmother's homemade pumpkin bread over to your friend's house. You might bake it in her oven, but it was your idea to bake and you brought all the ingredients, so it's your bread.

The other type of surrogate is a traditional surrogate, where a woman inseminated with sperm from the baby's intended father or a sperm donor. A traditional surrogate is genetically linked to the baby since she uses her own egg, but she differs from a birth mother who gives her baby up for adoption in that the surrogate baby's conception was completely planned with the understanding that she will never be the mother.

I was a gestational surrogate, which means I transferred an embryo that was made from the sperm from her father and an egg from a donor. The baby's mother was unable to get pregnant because of her battle with cancer. I was just part of the medical team who helped bring her baby earthside.

Before we even transferred the embryo, we signed a pre-birth order before a judge stating that any baby that was implanted in my body through IVF was going home with them. I never went on the birth certificate as the mother because as far as the legal system was concerned I was just a walking, talking fabulous incubator. That baby was their baby from conception.

Not every woman can be a surrogate



Crystal Henry

There are physical and psychological standards for surrogacy that come into play.

A certain number of c-sections, age, BMI, sexually transmitted diseases, or even thyroid issues can automatically disqualify a woman from becoming a surrogate. It's up to the agency and ultimately the reproductive endocrinologist performing the embryo transfer to decide if a woman is a good candidate to carry.

Agencies often require the surrogate and intended parents to undergo extensive psychological testing and counseling to ensure that no one goes off the deep end during or after the journey. That's not to say that issues don't arise. Failed embryo transfers and miscarriages are common, and the heartbreak can affect both the carrier and the parents.

Sometimes intended mothers feel jealousy or frustration they didn't anticipate because of their inability to experience the pregnancy. But most surrogates are sensitive, and we understand as women the amount of strength and trust it takes to hand over the reigns of this most precious gift. A

good agency will facilitate communication, and if need be, counseling for everyone involved to ensure a smooth resolution.

My intended mother was an absolute dream, and we became wonderful friends throughout our journey. Her baby is almost a year old, and we now stay in touch as friends and as one mother to another. Some intended parents don't want to be reminded of the heartbreak of infertility and choose to limit communication with the surrogate after the birth. However, open and honest communication and psychological counsel before the embryo transfer is the best way to make sure everyone's expectations are met.

Surrogates are crazy, just not in the way you might think



Crystal Henry

We all have to pass psychological testing, but the one thing surrogates have in common is we are all crazy about being pregnant. We are the weirdo women who are fascinated by the process of creating and growing life.

That doesn't mean we love every single aspect, or that our pregnancies all go smoothly. We still get morning sickness, back pain, stretch marks and cankles. But there's something about growing a human life that captivates us.

I know for sure that my family is complete, but I loved the thrill of pregnancy, labor and delivery so much that I wanted to ride that roller coaster again. My unmedicated births made me feel strong and courageous. Surrogacy gave me the chance to experience that rush without having to take on

another little sleep monger in my house. Plus I get the added bonus of knowing I gave two people the thing they wanted most in the world. It's like being Santa Claus, but fatter.

Surrogates are not mothers



Crystal Henry

Well, actually, surrogates usually are mothers. They just aren't the mothers of the surrogate babies they carry. So calling a gestational carrier a surrogate mother is a bit of a misnomer. Most agencies require a carrier to have at least one keeper. That means they have given birth to their own flesh and blood child, looked at it and decided to keep it. This is mostly to ensure that they already know what a pain in the butt newborns are, so they won't mistakenly think they might want to keep the surrogate baby.

So, again, surrogates are most often mothers before the surrogacy process — but, while a mother would do motherly things like picking out nursery themes or baby names, gestational surrogates don't do any of that for their surrogate bun in the oven. We are too busy chasing after our own keepers.

Surrogates do not want to keep the baby



Simi Denson

Let me reiterate. Surrogates do not want to keep the baby. Many women say they don't know how a surrogate could carry a baby without bonding with it. But I think those women feel that way for the same reasons I could never work in hospice care. I think I'd be constantly depressed because I'd get attached to all the people who died every day.

I'm so glad there are people who have the gift to care for people at the end of their lives, but I don't have that gift. Surrogates are gifted with caring for people at the beginning of their lives. They never question whether they will form a maternal bond because we know that gestating a human does not a mother make. I bonded with my own keeper babies in utero because I knew I'd be bringing them home. They were my babies, and I was their mother from day one, so I actively bonded with them. I say active because it took a conscious effort to love and nurture my babies day in and day out. In fact, our bond grows stronger every day because I foster a maternal love for them.

We never give that part of our hearts to our surro babies. Like a hospice nurse who cares for her patient, we too care for the babies we carry. But we know they are never ours. We are just extreme babysitters.

We don't do it for the money



Crystal Henry

One of the conversations all surrogates have that makes our skin crawl is the one about money. People mistakenly think surrogates look into carrying babies as a job. Carrying a baby just for the money makes about as much sense as teaching for the money. You definitely do it for the love.

Surrogates do typically get some sort of monetary compensation for their efforts, although not all do. Altruistic states like New York prohibit compensation, and they even legally penalize for it. I know a surrogate who carried for zero compensation who lost her uterus and ovaries due to her surrogate pregnancy. The parents got to keep the baby, and she got to keep all the bills. Compensation varies from state to state, as well as person to person.

Independent surrogates differ from agency surrogates, and first-timers differ from surrogates who have carried before. The compensation is typically to help offset the time surrogates take out of their lives for doctor appointments, transfers and the inconvenience of being pregnant in general.

On top of not being able to give 100 percent to our own kids and families while we are shuffling around like barfing beached whales, most surrogates get to enjoy fun things like daily hormone injections or missing work because of morning sickness or bedrest.

Some people scoff at surrogacy compensation, but those same people probably wouldn't babysit their friend's kid 24 hours a day seven days a week for free. Especially if that kid was jumping on their

bladder all night, knocking their ribs out of place or blasting a giant hole in their nether regions. Breaking it down hourly, I ended up with about \$1 an hour. We do it for the love.

Postpartum life is hard



Crystal Henry

Giving birth is a rough business physically and emotionally, whether you take home a newborn or not. The hormones that send your emotions reeling and the sexy granny-panties-required style of physical healing that comes along with birth is standard for both keepers and surro babies.

But something people might not realize is how strange it is to walk around with that fluffy postpartum body and no baby. It's not an unfulfilled motherly yearning because we want the baby back. We are perfectly happy sleeping through the night in those glorious months after delivery. But it just sucks to go to the grocery store with a flabby post baby bod and no infant to show for it.

It's easier to be visibly pregnant in public because we don't feel the need to explain our round tummies all the time. It's also easier to walk around fluffy and flabby if you've got an infant strapped to your chest in the Ergo. After my surrogate birth I constantly felt the urge to shout "I was a surrogate! I swear I just had a baby three days ago! I'm not just fat!" It's a totally vain reality, but it's a feeling many surrogates are familiar with and the general public is not.

It also gave me a new perspective on mothers who lost babies late in their pregnancy or just after birth. I might have been self conscious about my postpartum body, but I was reminded to be grateful that I had a happy story to go along with my flabby belly.

Surrogates are selfish



J Lynn Photography

Surrogates do carry for the love, but we are definitely selfish. First we get to lay smugly in our bed while the parents tend to their new baby's endless needs. We flip through magazines and order room service in the hospital, and we sleep soundly at night while the little life we grew keeps someone else on their toes at 3 a.m.

But the biggest payoff we look for is the one we get on delivery day. There is absolutely no compensation on earth that compares to the feeling of making ordinary people into parents. There isn't even a word in English that can describe the ethereal bliss I felt when that little girl came earth-side into the arms of her father, or when the warmth of her mother's chest soothed her tears and she gazed into the eyes of her parents for the first time.

It's a high I would selfishly chase over and over again.

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