



Coping with a traumatic birth

What is birth trauma?

Birth trauma is another name for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after birth. In the UK alone, an estimated 1 in 25 women a year develop PTSD and even more, 1 in 5, find birth traumatic. Some partners suffer PTSD too, from witnessing a traumatic birth.

“Breastfeeding was very important to me but it all went wrong. The traumatic birth made me lose all my confidence as a mum”.

“No one ever explained to me what I had gone through in the delivery room and I still don’t fully understand”.

“I had flashbacks of the final delivery for weeks afterwards and couldn’t stop thinking about it”.

“None of what happened during the birth was my fault, but I can’t shake off the feeling that I failed”.



More information on Page 2

For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was updated on 06/04/2020 and will be reviewed again in 04/2022 and when new evidence becomes available.

© Institute of Health Visiting 2020

Coping with a traumatic birth

Things that can make a birth traumatic include:

- Feelings of loss of control
- Feeling unsupported by staff, or that staff were hostile
- Lack of pain relief
- Frightening or distressing events that made the birth completely different from what you expected
- Lengthy labour or short and very intense labour
- Induction
- Forceps birth
- Emergency caesarean section
- Loss of blood after birth (postpartum haemorrhage)
- Fear of death or permanent injury
- Birth of a baby who is injured or disabled as a result of problems during birth
- Stillbirth
- Your baby has had to spend time in special care.

What are the symptoms of birth trauma?

You may...

- relive the worst parts of the birth over and over again, through flashbacks or nightmares
- feel jumpy or over-anxious
- find it difficult to bond with your baby
- become over-protective of your baby
- have difficulty sleeping
- find it hard to remember some parts of the birth
- feel depressed, irritable or angry
- find it difficult to concentrate
- find it hard to breastfeed.

However, you may still be traumatised if you are only experiencing one or two of these symptoms. Intrusive thoughts – going over and over the birth in your mind in wakefulness or sleep - is the most common symptom.

These symptoms can have a big effect on your day-to-day life. You might find it hard to get on with your partner, particularly if they don't understand why you still keep thinking about the birth. You might avoid triggers that remind you of the birth – other women with babies, television programmes about birth, hospital appointments. You might feel frightened about getting pregnant again and worry about having another traumatic birth.

Birth is completely unpredictable so you should never feel guilty about a traumatic birth, but PTSD can make you feel that way.

Is birth trauma the same as Postnatal Depression (PND)?

No. Some of the symptoms are the same and some women experience both birth trauma and PND, but the two illnesses are distinct and need to be treated individually.

If you keep reliving the trauma through flashbacks, intrusive thoughts or nightmares related to the birth, or you feel constantly jumpy and alert, then it's more likely that you have birth trauma.

Why can't I get over my birth trauma?

Sometimes people close to you will tell you to stop dwelling on your bad birth experience. They might say: "All that matters is that you have a healthy baby" or, "But you've got a lovely baby." They mean well but actually this can make you feel that what happened to you is not important.

But PTSD isn't something you can just choose not to have – symptoms such as flashbacks and anxiety are involuntary. Scans show that the brains of PTSD sufferers look different from those of healthy people. These differences, in the bits of the brain that govern emotion and memory, are the reason people with PTSD continue to re-experience the terror they felt during their trauma, even though they are no longer under threat. People diagnosed with PTSD need treatment to support their recovery.

More information on Page 3

Coping with a traumatic birth

How is birth trauma treated?

Two main treatments have been found to work. Both usually involve six to 10 sessions over the course of two or three months:

- **Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).** This can help you to understand and process what you went through and change how you think about your experience, including finding ways to improve your state of mind now.
- **Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR).** This is a way of stopping your flashbacks and feelings of fear by moving them into your long-term memory, using a technique that involves watching a moving object or listening to a series of taps through headphones. Although it sounds strange, many sufferers find it very effective.

You can ask for a referral to a CBT or EMDR specialist from your GP. If you are in England, you can self-refer through a service called Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT).

There is currently no medication proven to work with PTSD but if you have other symptoms, such as depression, medication might help so you should discuss this with your healthcare provider.

I'd like to have another baby again, but I'm scared. What can I do?

Some hospitals offer a service, sometimes called "Birth afterthoughts" or "Birth reflections", that enables you to go through your birth notes with a midwife or obstetrician. Some women find this helpful. It can help you to piece together missing information, especially if there are parts of the labour and birth that you've forgotten.

If you do get pregnant, it can be helpful to write down your fears and discuss them with your midwife during the antenatal period, around 20 weeks of pregnancy or sooner. You can work through your fears and discuss other options that you had perhaps not considered before.

In some areas of the country, you can ask for a referral to see a perinatal psychologist who can support you through your pregnancy and teach you coping techniques.

Where can I get help if I have birth trauma?

If you're having trouble getting over your birth experience, please remember, you are not alone.

Discuss how you are feeling with your GP, midwife or health visitor. Awareness of this problem varies enormously, so if you don't feel that your health professional understands, please show them this resource.

You may find it helpful to share your experience with other women who have experienced traumatic birth. Ask your midwife, health visitor or GP for information on support available in your area. Support is also available from charities including the BTA (see information below).

About the Birth Trauma Association

The Birth Trauma Association (BTA) was established in 2004 to support families who have been traumatised during childbirth. They are not trained counsellors, therapists or medical professionals. They are parents who do their best to support other parents who have been affected by a traumatic birth. The BTA is the only organisation in the UK dealing solely and specifically with this issue. Their work is focused on three main areas:

- raising awareness of birth trauma;
- working to prevent it;
- supporting families in need.

Get in touch



www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk



support@birthtraumaassociation.org.uk



@BirthTrauma



[bit.ly/38cUD8I](https://www.facebook.com/birthtraumaassociation) We also have a closed group on Facebook where women with birth trauma can support each other. You can find it at [bit.ly/2ULJBDC](https://www.facebook.com/birthtraumaassociation)

Authors:

With special thanks to the following contributors for their help in writing this resource:

- Susan Ayers, City, University of London
- Amy Delicate, City, University of London
- Angela Leach, Midwife
- Kirstie McKenzie McHarg
- Camilla Rosan, Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families
- Jo Smyth, Birth Trauma Association

For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was updated on 06/04/2020 and will be reviewed again in 04/2022 and when new evidence becomes available.

© Institute of Health Visiting 2020