

## WHAT IS BIRTH TRAUMA?

Birth trauma refers to both Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and symptoms of trauma which do not meet a full PTSD diagnosis. Around 1 in 25 women experience PTSD following childbirth, while it is estimated that around 1/3 of women find some aspect of their birth traumatic but may not meet a diagnosis of PTSD. What is crucial is that birth trauma is 'in the eye of the beholder' - the traumatic experience is entirely subjective.

Common symptoms of birth trauma include: experiencing flashbacks, nightmares or intrusive thoughts related to the birth or the period around the birth; avoiding talking about the birth or avoiding reminders of the birth; feeling irritable, jumpy or agitated; noticing changes in mood.

For some, these symptoms are not noticed until some months after the birth - or are managed until they become too difficult to overcome, for example when planning a subsequent pregnancy.

Birth trauma doesn't just affect the mother or birthing person. It can also affect birth partners, family members, friends and healthcare professionals.

## KEY POINTS

Birth Trauma is not the same as Post Natal Depression and should be treated differently

Current recommendations for treatment are trauma-focused CBT or EMDR. Any treatment should begin with safety and stabilisation to help regain control over the symptoms of trauma. Medication is not currently recommended by the NICE guidance unless other treatment has been declined (although some do find it very helpful)

Many people benefit from using a range of different approaches, which might include body therapies, medication, holistic techniques as well as psychotherapeutic approaches

Birth trauma is treatable, and often preventable. Interpersonal factors, such as perceived support, are highly related linked to trauma after birth

Most of us are now familiar with the diagnosis Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, it seems that the idea that this can be related to a person's birth experience is a relatively new concept for some health care professionals. So, below are some of the main ways that it is different to PTSD in other contexts. Feel free to share this with care providers.

Unlike war or sexual assault, birth is seen by society as a 'normal' and happy event and thus many find it difficult to understand that someone might find it traumatic. Therefore, mothers, birthing people, fathers and/or birth partners can find it difficult to seek help or their experiences can be dismissed by others, particularly if they have been seen to have had a 'normal' birth. Trauma is subjective to the person, what one person will experience as traumatic, another will not.

Avoiding reminders of the traumatic event are near impossible after birth, given that parents now have their baby to care for. Having these reminders can trigger intrusive memories of the traumatic birth, resulting in feelings of fear and anxiety which can have an impact on the parents' ability to bond with their baby. Parents may also avoid routine postnatal and hospital appointments because they find them too distressing to attend.

Those with a previous trauma history (such as sexual abuse) and/or mental health difficulties are understood to be at a higher risk of birth related PTSD.

The evidence shows that for many, it is not the experience of birth per se that leaves them feeling traumatised but the way that they were treated by those caring for them, such as being ignored, their concerns being minimised or feeling criticised, judged or humiliated. This can leave parents feeling ashamed or angry as a result.

Witnessing a traumatic birth can also lead to birth related PTSD, so this can occur in birth partners, families and health care professionals too.

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

Acting with compassion, kindness and empathy is key. The way that you share information and care for women can make the difference between someone feeling that their birth experience was traumatic or not.

Listen to a person's experience of their birth. Support them to think about how they would like their next birth experience to be different. Many women, birthing people and their families say they felt ignored (for example when raising concerns or asking for pain relief) or that procedures were carried out without their informed consent. Even in difficult circumstances and tight resources, you can ensure that they feel contained and respected, not traumatised.

Take care of yourselves and your colleagues. Acknowledging that you have all had a difficult shift, have a cup of tea, do some mindfulness meditation, ensure that one another has a break, even if this is short! The kindness that we know you extend to women and their families applies to yourselves and your colleagues too.

### FURTHER READING

- Birth Trauma Association [www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk](http://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk)
- McKenzie-McHarg K et al. (2015). Post-traumatic stress disorder following childbirth: an update of current issues and recommendations. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 33(3). April 2015. DOI: 10.1080/02646838.2015.1031646
- Bromley, P., Hollins Martin, C.J., Patterson, J. (2017). Recognising the differences between Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-Post Childbirth (PTSD-PC) and Post Natal Depression (PND): a guide for midwives. *British Journal of Midwifery*. 25(8): 484-490.

#### Books:

- How To Heal A Bad Birth
- Why Birth Trauma Matters

Giving birth, whether it is a first or fifth baby, can be an intense, long and frightening experience. Often coined as one of the 'happiest days of your life' for many people, labour and the birth experience can have a hugely negative impact on them and their families. Following birth, attention often purely focuses on the well-being of the baby with little consideration to the feelings of the mother or birthing person. Comments such as "well at least your baby is healthy, that's what matters", can lead women, birthing people and their birth partners to feel that the trauma they have experienced is being dismissed or belittled.

## KEY POINTS

Symptoms of trauma are in response to a traumatic event. That is, an individual response to a traumatic experience, when you felt that your life or your baby's life was in danger, or you felt scared, alone, helpless, unheard, silenced or dismissed. All of these can occur during pregnancy, birth or after birth.

Many women, birthing people and birth partners talk of experiencing some trauma symptoms in the weeks after the birth of their baby. You may experience: having flashbacks (intrusive memories which may be visual or could be a sound, smell or sensation) or nightmares about the birth; feeling jumpy or on edge, avoiding anything to do with the birth (including subsequent hospital appointments etc.), feeling irritable, feeling your mood is very changeable, having negative thoughts and trouble sleeping.

Many women, birthing people and birth partners may have some symptoms of trauma but without meeting the criteria for a diagnosis. You may feel violated or horrified by your experience. These symptoms can impact on you too, whether or not a diagnosis is present.

Most importantly, it does not matter if others feel that your birth was "textbook" or it "went well" or whether you had a vaginal delivery, caesarean section, lots of medical intervention or none at all. Experiences of feeling traumatised are subjective and very personal. If you feel you need some help to heal from your experience (or multiple experiences) around birth please speak to someone as soon as you can and get the help you deserve.

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

If you feel that your experiences are having an impact upon your day to day life, your relationship with your baby and/or others please discuss this with your GP, Health Visitor or other health care professional you feel you can speak with.

They can help think with you about who can help you best, this might be with a specialist team or individual for assessment and therapeutic treatment and/or medication.

In some areas of the UK, you can also self-refer to these services. Most people go on to make excellent recoveries with the right support.

### FURTHER READING

There are lots of free resources on the [Make Birth Better website](#)

You may also wish to visit:

- AIMS [www.aims.org.uk](http://www.aims.org.uk)
- Birth Trauma Association [www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk](http://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk)
- Birthrights [www.birthrights.org.uk](http://www.birthrights.org.uk)

Books:

- [How To Heal A Bad Birth](#)
- [Why Birth Trauma Matters](#)

## THERAPIES AND TREATMENTS

There are a number of therapies and treatments that can help alleviate the symptoms of trauma after a difficult birth. Some therapies have been shown to be effective. It is also important to find the right therapist to be able to engage, trust and build a relationship.

Therapy can help you process the memories of your traumatic birth in order to reduce the feelings of distress, fear and anxiety related to childbirth. If you are a parent this can help increase your sense of confidence as an individual in your own right and as a parent with your new baby. If you are a member of staff involved in birthing this can also help you in your work to regain your professional confidence.

Trauma focused therapies are not just about following an approach, but also about developing a strong relationship with your therapist to feel safe and secure. Some holistic approaches are also outlined below.

Speak to your GP, Health Visitor or other health professional who can refer you to NHS therapy services. If there are long waiting lists you may want to consider seeing a private therapist. Although this can be a large financial commitment many therapists will offer reduced rates. It is always important to check that therapists are properly qualified and registered. Trauma work usually requires weekly sessions over several months.

### Here are some of the main forms of therapy available:

- Cognitive Behavioural therapy (CBT) – this is a NICE recommended therapy for PTSD and trauma which works by identifying and challenging negative thoughts in relation to the traumatic experience, processing memories and reducing unhelpful strategies/behaviours
- Eye Movement Desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) – another NICE recommended therapy for PTSD and trauma which works by focusing on unprocessed memories in order to move them into long-term processed memory and developing coping strategies.
- Compassion focused therapy – to address feelings of guilt and shame experienced in connection with past trauma and to help clients to become kinder and more compassionate with themselves
- Short term or longer term psychoanalytic psychotherapy can be helpful to make sense of the trauma at a deeper level and why it has taken hold of you.
- Somatic therapies – More of a focus on how the body reacts during a traumatic experience and how to lower the body's arousal level when focusing on a traumatic event
- Antidepressants may be prescribed. The most common ones for PTSD and trauma symptoms are Paroxetine and Sertraline.

## There are also a number of other strategies you might find helpful:

- Psychoeducation – learning about how birth trauma affects your brain and body and why you have the symptoms you do
- Grounding techniques – learning to bring yourself back to the present if you are experiencing a flashback or distressing images
- Learning relaxation and breathing techniques to help lower your body's reaction to the trauma
- Writing down your birth story, feelings or letters to key people in the process (midwives, partners, doctors) which can help make better sense of your experience
- Drawing or painting your experiences as a way of healing
- Speaking with empathic others about the birth
- Focusing on your wellbeing through such things as yoga, massage, eating well, going for walks
- Joining a birth trauma support group to be able to share your experiences
- Writing a letter of complaint to your hospital
- Taking advantage of a debriefing service at your hospital where you can review your medical birth notes with a midwife

### FURTHER READING



#### Websites:

- Birth Trauma: Make Birth Better, The Birth Trauma Association, Unfold your Wings
- Psychoeducation and grounding work: [getselfhelp](#)
- Finding a psychologist or psychotherapist: The birth trauma association, The British Psychological Society, The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, The Counselling Directory
- Support groups: The Birth Trauma Association has a facebook group

#### Books:

- Birth Trauma (Kim Thomas), How to Heal a Bad Birth (Melissa Buijn and Debby Gould), Trauma is Really Strange (Steve Haines), Why Birth Trauma Matters (Emma Svanberg)

Finding a psychologist or psychotherapist: The Birth Trauma Association, The British Psychological Society, The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, The Counselling Directory



Birth trauma doesn't just affect the birthing person. Witnessing a traumatic birth can be very distressing, and some fathers/same sex parents suffer birth trauma or PTSD as a result. The birthing mother or baby doesn't have to have been at risk of death or serious injury for the birth to be experienced as traumatic.

Partners who perceive the birth as threatening to their loved ones can be left traumatised and may experience similar feelings to the birthing mother of intense fear, failure, powerlessness or abandonment.

When one or both partners have experienced the birth as traumatic it can have a profound impact on the couple's relationship. Couples can report a loss of intimacy, an increase in negative feelings towards their partner and of disconnection from each other.

## KEY POINTS

**The Forgotten Parent:** The impact of a traumatic birth is often overlooked for partners who can also be severely traumatised by what they witness.

**Masculinity and Birth:** Making sense of a traumatic birth can be a different process for men than women. Gender stereotypes about men needing to be 'strong' may make some fathers feel stigmatised if they admit they have been affected by birth or that they shouldn't need support as it didn't happen to them.

**The Impact on the Couple Relationship:** The experience of a traumatic birth can place the couple relationship under considerable strain. This is an important issue because poor-quality couple relationships can affect the well-being of both the parents and babies.

**Birth as a unique experience:** The same birth can be experienced completely differently by everyone present. What can be traumatic for one parent can be wonderful for the other parent. For couples this can make the process of recovering from a traumatic birth complicated and may result in them feeling misunderstood and angry towards each other.



## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

### Parents

If you feel that you may be suffering from birth trauma, please speak to someone you trust. This might be a healthcare professional, friend or family member.

Remember just because you did not give birth it doesn't mean that you can't be affected by birth trauma or in need of support.

For help with your couple relationship: Relate offer counselling services for couples nationwide. NHS IAPT Talking Therapies services offers couples counselling for depression.

### Professionals

Encourage couples to talk about the changes in their relationship. Enquire about distress in the couple relationship antenatally and postnatally and offer support/referrals to services.

Check in with how partners are feeling during birth. Remember it is their perception of what is happening to their loved ones that matters.

Plan who/what support will be offered to partners if the situation during birth becomes complicated.

Include partners in postnatal checks for birth trauma.

### FURTHER READING

- Birth Trauma Association [www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk](http://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk)
- Birthrights [www.birthrights.org.uk](http://www.birthrights.org.uk)
- From Dads to Dads [www.fromdadstodads.org.uk](http://www.fromdadstodads.org.uk)
- [www.oneplusone.space/couple-connection](http://www.oneplusone.space/couple-connection) is an online web service for couples providing information, guidance, courses and activities for parents to help improve and strengthen their couple relationship

#### Books:

- How To Heal A Bad Birth
- Why Birth Trauma Matters

Although many parents would like to have another child, experiencing a previous birth trauma can prevent this from happening as anything that reminds them of their past traumatic experience can result in intrusive, distressing memories of the birth. They may feel too physically damaged to consider another pregnancy or labour, and/or they may be worried about experiencing the same thing again or something worse.

However, with the right support there are number of things that health care professionals and maternity services can do to support you:

**Psychological therapy:** This may be what you need to do first so that you can process the memories of your traumatic birth which would help reduce the feelings of distress, fear and anxiety related to childbirth and increase your sense of empowerment and confidence to handle the pregnancy and birth next time. You would also be able to explore with a therapist what to put in place in relation to your next pregnancy and birth so that you feel more safe and secure. Therapy could also help you to communicate more clearly with maternity staff so that they understand your needs during labour. There are specialist talking therapy approaches known to help those who have experienced a birth trauma, such as EMDR or trauma-focused CBT.

Once you feel less frightened about what you have experienced you may feel more able to tell those involved in your care that you have experienced a previous birth trauma. There are a number of things that can be put into place with your permission that will hopefully help you to have a more positive experience and to feel less frightened and more empowered about what might happen the next time.

It can be really helpful to get a support team in place. This might include your GP, specialist mental health midwives, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and others. Speak to your GP or midwife about what is available in your area. Depending on your financial circumstances, you might also contact a doula, hypnobirthing teacher, independent midwife and other independent practitioners. While this is not accessible to everyone, many offer reduced fees or payment plans.

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

Tell someone about your experiences as early as you can into your pregnancy, this will allow the professionals involved in your care and those around you to ensure that you get the support you require, as described above.

There is also a private Facebook group run by the Birth Trauma Association where you can connect with others who have also experienced birth trauma.

Feel free to show these crib sheets to your care providers.

## A FEW IDEAS TO TRY:

- **Birth preference planning.** Getting support to write a specific birth preferences plan may be helpful. This may include a range of preferences and information such as things that you would or would not like to happen, how you would like information shared and explained to you, where you wish to give birth (be this at a specific hospital, midwife led unit or at home) and so on as well as informing them you have had previously experienced a traumatic birth.
- **Reviewing your previous delivery notes** and visiting your chosen place of birth with your partner can also be helpful.
- Some women and birth partners find **attending an antenatal class or hypnobirthing course** helpful to learn about the labour process and to consider their preferences and learn techniques to manage the intensity of birth. It is so important to remember that this is your body and birth and you really do have the right to say what you do and do not want to happen.
- Some hospitals also use a **sticker system**, where a sticker is placed on the front of a women's notes to ensure that professionals involved in her obstetric care are aware that she has previously experienced a traumatic birth and thus support her accordingly. You can ask about this.

### FURTHER READING

- AIMS [www.aims.org.uk](http://www.aims.org.uk)
- Birthrights [www.birthrights.org.uk](http://www.birthrights.org.uk)
- Birth Trauma Association [www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk](http://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk)

#### Books:

- How To Heal A Bad Birth
- Why Birth Trauma Matters

Having a baby together can be an exciting experience, however, this is not always the case. Therefore it is important that your partner feels supported during their pregnancy so that the difficult times may not linger as long or be as hard.

Often if there are signs during the pregnancy that things are not going well, then the post birth experience could be similar. If your partner can be helped during the pregnancy, they will have a much better chance of having less issues afterwards. If your partner has suffered a traumatic birth before, then it is vital you are able to give them the support they need.

In any case, even if the pregnancy is going well, showing interest and support can help you both feel more connected and help your partner's ability to stay well.

- Educate yourself about what to expect during the pregnancy, the birth and afterwards
- If your partner had a traumatic birth before, then being aware of birth trauma and how it may impact with the current pregnancy is essential
- Be aware of any mood changes where your partner may be becoming more anxious or depressed and discuss this with them
- Be a good listener if your partner wants to talk about any worries they may have about the pregnancy, birth or afterwards. Being able to patiently listen, not interject and not judge can help your partner feel that they are not alone
- Be as understanding and empathic as possible
- Help your partner make decisions about the birth. If your partner had a traumatic birth before, this is essential so that they feel safe and secure.
- Help your partner have realistic expectations about the pregnancy, birth and afterwards to lower disappointment and sadness postnatally
- Gather information for your partner, or with your partner about:
  - Therapists who specialise in perinatal work
  - Self-help approaches that can be supportive during pregnancy

- Become an advocate for your partner with the hospital, especially if your partner has already experienced a traumatic birth, so that they get the support they need prior to the birth, during the birth and afterwards
- Encourage your partner to do positive things and to look after their wellbeing so that they are healthy during the pregnancy
- Try to go to all hospital appointments, scans and antenatal classes together
- Make sure you know what your partner wants for the birth and that you would be able to clearly express this to hospital staff or home birth midwives
- Be aware of the risk factors that may lead to birth trauma afterwards – i.e. previous trauma history of and/or current psychological issues such as anxiety in pregnancy, a high need for control, unhelpful coping skills.

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

Educate yourself on pregnancy, birth and post birth and any difficulties that may arise

Start gathering information that may help with the pregnancy, birth and afterwards

### FURTHER READING

#### Websites:

Pregnancy: [Make Birth Better](#), [National Childbirth Trust](#), [The Baby Centre](#)

Psychoeducation about anxiety and depression: [getselfhelp](#)

Finding a psychologist or psychotherapist: [The Birth Trauma Association](#), [The British Psychological Society](#), [The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#), [The Counselling Directory](#)

#### Books:

[Mindful Birthing](#) (Nancy Bardacke),

[Becoming a Parent](#) (Jackie Ganley)

Being able to support your partner after a difficult birth can not only help your partner to start to feel better but also help them to feel less alone in their struggle. In fact, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that partners, families etc are involved in any treatment process that the woman or birthing person is going through, by offering support and being involved in decision making.

As a first step though, you need to make sure that you are ok and that you are not suffering from trauma yourself. If this is the case, please seek help so that you can be the best support for your partner, your child and yourself.

- Educate yourself about birth trauma and the symptoms, so that you can relate the information to your partner, but also that you may be able to tolerate and understand your partner's mood swings and upsetting reactions
- Be a good listener. Being able to patiently listen, not interject and not judge can help your partner feel cared for and taken seriously
- Do not set a timeframe in which you think they should be healed, follow their cues and let them lead the way. They need the patience to do this at their own pace. This can feel frustrating for you, so you may wish to seek support yourself.
- Be as understanding as possible. You have to be able to believe that what your partner went through was traumatic even though it may not seem the case to you
- Make it clear to your partner that they are not going mad and that they will get better. If they can trust in you then they can begin to feel empowered.
- Allow your partner the space to talk about their experiences. It is better for the words to come out and be heard, as opposed to swirling around in one's head. It is also the first step to making sense of the traumatic experience.
- Encourage your partner to seek help through your GP, health visitor, friends, so that they start to feel better and so that it does not become too overwhelming for you

- Never underestimate the power of being there for your partner, just listening and being kind is incredibly healing in itself.
- Gather information for your partner, support groups in the area, therapists who specialise in birth trauma work, other treatments available – i.e. relaxation and breathing techniques self-help techniques such as writing letters, birth stories and feelings down, using art to describe the experience or hospital debriefing services – to review medical records.
- Become an advocate for your partner, especially when dealing with medical issues and medical staff, so that your partner gets the support they need
- Encourage your partner to do positive things and to look after their wellbeing
- Get support yourself if you are finding it difficult listening and being there for your partner
- If necessary, step up your parenting role so that the baby feels safe and secure

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

Educate yourself on birth trauma and available resources

Make sure you are also being supported yourself, and if you have any symptoms of trauma please seek help

### FURTHER READING

#### Websites:

<https://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk/for-parents/fathers-partners-page>

<http://www.fromdadstodads.org.uk/well-being/birth-trauma/mums-birth-trauma/>

<https://www.birthtrauma.org.au/where-to-start/fathers-and-partners/>

<http://beyondbirthtrauma.com/pregnancy-and-birth-after-trauma/>

Birthrights: Knowing your rights / making a complaint



When we become parents we need self-care like never before, but often the things we used to do to nourish ourselves can feel inaccessible - we don't have the same time, energy or funds available. We need a whole new self-care toolkit but in our sleep deprived, overstimulated state it is hard to be creative in finding new ways to top up our energy bank and often guilt stops us in our tracks too.

Many of the barriers drop away when we get crystal clear on self-care. Self-care is health care. It is nourishment for the head, the heart and the body. It helps us cope with the challenges of parenthood, it helps us heal and restore after stressful or depleting experiences, it gives us a protective buffer against the next curveball and self-care gives us access to a better version of ourselves.

If we want to raise resilient and compassionate kids, we need to be teaching them the tools of self-care too, even better, engage in nourishing practices together. It needn't take much time, energy and many self-care rituals don't cost a penny! Looks for ways that you can infuse more tenderness in your day and see how the benefits ripple out beyond you.



suzyreading.co.uk

@suzyreading

#MondayMicroMoment - Live Instagram Session 9am Mondays

Having a framework helps bring self-care to life. I created the Vitality Wheel to connect us with something nourishing in the moment. Take a look at the wheel and you'll see eight different ways that we can look after ourselves. The spokes of the wheel are not designed to be distinct and you'll see that an activity like taking a walk in the woods could fall in several categories.

The whole point of it is to help you identify something nourishing and accessible in the moment, because in my experience, when we're feeling frazzled, fatigued and full up, it is hard to put your finger on it! Use the Vitality Wheel for inspiration, thinking of all the activities, rituals and practices that resonate for you and your family, and jot them down on the wheel. Turn to the wheel whenever you and your family need a little nurturing.

Suzy Reading

## KEY POINTS

Take the 'micro moments' approach and dot them through your day. A few deep breaths. Savour the scent of your morning coffee. Repeat a mantra. A few minutes of journaling before you go to bed.

Become skilled in the art of curiosity, kindness, compassion and savouring and this transforms the lens through which you see the world. What are you already doing that you can make more nourishing? The way you greet the day, the way in which you dress yourself, how you shower, how you eat your meals, the way you talk to yourself?

If you find it hard to remember self-care, piggyback existing habits with an act of self-care. Every time you drink a glass of water, take the opportunity to stand tall, relax your shoulders and enjoy five deep breaths. Pair another self-care activity to toilet breaks, like using a hand wash with a scent you love. While you're waiting for the kettle to boil take a yoga pose

If self-care keeps getting bumped, make an appointment with you, keep trying and gently make it a routine.

It is crucial to accept help and support from friends and family and talk about how you are feeling to people you trust

## FURTHER READING



There is some wonderful self-care inspiration for parents on Instagram - @mumologist, @mothers.wellness.toolkit and @suzyreading.

Empowering books include Anya Hayes' 'The Supermum Myth', 'Stand Tall Like A Mountain: Mindfulness and Self-Care for Children and Parents' by Suzy Reading, 'The Little Book of Self Care' by Beccy Hands and 'Self Care for the Real world' by Nadia Narian.

The Nourish App is another wealth of self-care resources and the Clementine App has some lovely hypnotherapy tools.

## WHAT CAN WE ALL LEARN FROM BIRTH TRAUMA?

When we talk about birth trauma it can seem like a daunting prospect to any expectant parents. This sheet is designed to help you navigate the birth of your baby in a way that will minimise risks for trauma and will hopefully give you some ideas about planning your birth.

There are certain factors known to improve a parent's satisfaction when it comes to giving birth:

Receiving continuity of care from a midwife, feeling in control, being with baby in the hour following birth, having a home birth, having a trusted and experienced birth partner & giving birth in an upright position

Think about how you could incorporate these into your pregnancy and birth. Could you write a birth plan to increase your feelings of control over the birth? Perhaps including your ideal birth scenario, as well as a plan b, c & d to include other situations that may occur, such as induction or c-section? Is there anyone who could support you during your birth?

Knowledge is power and it is key when it comes to birth. However, this notion can seem overwhelming with reams of information at our fingertips. Therefore, try looking to alternative resources- such as The Positive Birth Movement Meetings, finding a Birth Buddy through Tell Me A Good Birth Story or attending classes like pregnancy yoga, relaxation or hypnobirthing. These kinds of personal support can offer a wealth of wisdom that simply cannot be bestowed from a book.

If you know that you have any specific needs, such as gestational diabetes or high blood pressure, but you are keen to birth in a particular way, ask your midwife if you can have an appointment with a consultant midwife to put into place a specific care plan for birth. This could include options that are not normally recommended for people in your specific situation but that you feel are an important part of your journey to a positive birth, e.g. a water birth or a home birth.

It is important to understand that you are always in control. When it comes to any decisions that need to be made, your care team can make recommendations but ultimately you are the one that decides what happens next. This means that if you don't want a vaginal examination, you don't have one or if you don't want a continuous monitor strapped to your bump, you don't have one.

You always have a choice. If you are unsure about what choice to make, use the following acronym to help you formulate questions for your care team before agreeing or declining:

B- What are the benefits?

R- What are the risks?

A- Are there any alternatives?

I - What is my intuition telling me?

N- What happens if we do nothing?

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

If you are pregnant right now, remember it is your body, your birth and your baby.

Foster a sense of ownership over your body throughout your pregnancy, look to others for support, learn how your body works to give birth, practice the skill of relaxation. Check out the Birthrights and AIMS websites to learn about your rights and choices. All of these things will help you on your journey to a positive birth.

Birth isn't something that we should be afraid of, if you are feeling particularly anxious about it, then speak to your midwife and ask if there are any local resources to support you.

Talk to friends and family members about their births, read a variety of birth stories, watch videos of different types of birth.

Prepare a birth plan which involves not just your ideal plan a but also what you would like to happen in different eventualities. Discussing this with your birth partner and care providers can also help you think about your options and let them know what you might need from them in different situations.

Think about how you cope with new situations now. What helps you feel safe? Use this information to help you think about what you might need.

Make a postnatal plan too! To ensure you have support throughout your early parenting journey

### FURTHER READING

The Positive Birth Book, Milli Hill

Your No Guilt Pregnancy Plan, Rebecca Schiller

<http://www.tellmeagoodbirthstory.com/find-a-birth-buddy>

<https://www.positivebirthmovement.org/groups/>

<http://www.birthrights.org.uk/resources/factsheets/>

## WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BRAIN WHEN TRAUMATISED?

Individual responses to traumatic events vary between people, but there are several predictable effects of trauma on the brain that are important to know about if we are to understand the ways in which traumatic experiences can affect our thoughts, feelings, behaviours and bodies.

During and after a traumatic event, there are changes in areas of the brain involved in the fear response (the 'amygdala'), in storing and encoding memories (the 'hippocampus'), and in problem-solving, logical reasoning, planning and decision-making (the 'prefrontal cortex' or PFC).

The amygdala is a primitive brain region that operates outside our conscious awareness. It has one main job to do: it senses danger and activates the alarm. Evolution means that it will always override the more sophisticated and much slower PFC brain functions when survival is at stake. When the alarm goes off, the body is quickly prepared for action and all non-essential systems are switched off to maximise the chances of surviving.

The hippocampus's usual task is to code and store our memories in an organised way so you can retrieve them later when you want to - rather like a filing cabinet. But at times of danger, the hippocampus goes off-line and a very different sort of memory gets stored.

These trauma memories are made up of vivid sensory fragments that can be difficult to put into words, and which are involuntarily triggered by environmental reminders of the event.

People often try very hard to stop these memories from coming into their heads because they feel so frightening when they occur, but these efforts to block them out don't usually work very well, and they can slow down the brain's own natural attempts to convert the trauma memory into a 'normal' memory.

## KEY POINTS

- In a brain that has been traumatised, the thinking and memory storing systems are under-activated, and the fear centre is over-activated. This means that we get 'stuck' in fight-flight-freeze mode
- You didn't choose for this to happen: it is a result of your brain and body's naturally evolved way of trying to protect you from harm
- PTSD is an understandable reaction to a traumatic event: understanding what is happening in your brain can make it feel a bit less frightening
- Just as the brain can change in response to past traumatic events, it can change again in response to future experiences: it is 'plastic' and continues to rewire itself

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

Talk to someone you trust about what you are experiencing: social support is key to recovery after trauma, and you are not alone

Please don't suffer in silence – ask for help from a qualified psychological therapist who is fully trained to work with the body and the mind after trauma

Practise simple grounding skills to help you feel safe in your body. Focus on your current environment and try to identify 3 things you can see, 3 things you can hear, and 3 things you can feel on your skin. This can help to anchor you in the here-and-now and remind you that you are safe

### FURTHER READING

The Body Keeps The Score (Bessel van der Kolk, 2015)

London Trauma Specialists Brain model of PTSD: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb1yBva3Xas>

The Compassionate Mind Approach to Recovering from Trauma (Deborah Lee, 2012)





## How has my baby been affected by the birth trauma and what can I do to help?

Becoming a parent is a seismic life event for us all, but when you, your partner and baby/ies have come through a traumatic birth (and possibly pregnancy), there can be an unexpected and confusing mix of feelings to deal with. Some parents express how unprepared they were for the traumatic events they encounter, and worry about how their baby/ies, and their relationship with their baby/ies may have been impacted. Depending on the circumstances of the birth some of the concerns parents commonly express are:

"I was so scared during the birth and afterwards, that I didn't really focus on the baby – will he think I don't love him?"

"My baby was whisked away to the NICU before I got a chance to hold him and have skin-to-skin – how will that impact us bonding?"

"I didn't get to have the birth I wanted, and now I can't breastfeed – how will that impact my baby and our relationship?"

"Sometimes when the baby cries I feel really churned up and don't want to pick him up – how will that make the baby feel?"

"I feel my partner has bonded better with the baby than I have – what sort of parent does that make me?"

Whilst these feelings can be very distressing for parents, it is very important to understand that they are neither right nor wrong, but may be related to how birth trauma impacts us and our babies psychologically and neurologically. Just like us, our babies may also have been exposed to high levels of stress hormones such as adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol during the birth – these hormones are released by the brain in fight-flight-freeze situations. Common signs of trauma/distress in babies may be:

- Heightened startle reflex – 'jumpiness' with loud noises or sudden changes in routine
- Sleep difficulties – either difficulty falling or staying asleep or oversleeping
- Heightened sensitivity to transitions and changes in environment eg moving baby from boob to cot, or from home into a car seat
- Feeding difficulties – colic, reflux, regular possetting after feeds, failure to gain weight
- Difficulty soothing or settling, very difficult to calm baby on ongoing basis
- Clinginess, not easily put down or passed to another person
- Muscular rigidity – flinching when touched or massaged, not relaxed
- Crying – pained, high pitch screaming even when core needs have been met



Of course, these signs of distress may be visible when baby is hungry, bored or tired, or going through a growth spurt or teething – but if you notice these signs on an ongoing basis without apparent cause, it might be worth discussing with your GP, Health Visitor or other trusted person. It might be that they can suggest practical ways of helping your baby, or they could refer you to a practitioner trained in supporting babies and their parents after birth trauma. Also check out the Birth Trauma Association, as well as the Parent-Infant Partnership UK and the Association of Infant Mental Health.

## WHAT CAN I DO RIGHT NOW?

- Understand that you, your baby and the whole family have come through a very difficult experience, and that this is NOT your fault.
- Being able to support your baby post-trauma is not something you can do on your own. Due to the impact the birth trauma may have on you eg hyperarousal, intrusive memories, it is vital that you can have regular breaks from looking after the baby to restore your own equilibrium. Call on friends and family regularly so you can get rest and respite.
- Remember that creating a relationship with your baby is a process. Sometimes after a traumatic birth, we do not experience the 'rush of love' we expected. High levels of stress hormones may make this more difficult – however, you can establish a loving relationship with your baby over time.
- When picking baby up or feeding check your own body posture and breathing. Babies can often pick up and react to our physical stress. If we are not calm, it will be more difficult to calm them.
- Infant massage, skin to skin, swaddling – are all very helpful in the early days and are tried and proven ways of helping baby with potential trauma symptoms such as muscle tension and colic.
- Allow yourself moments of 'meeting' your baby. Pause, slow down and allow yourself just be with your baby when feeding or holding him, or as he falls asleep. Reflect on the little milestones you have achieved, and how far you have come together.
- You may feel a mix of feelings towards the baby – some parents talk about feeling guilty, or angry and ashamed, or as if they have failed the baby. It is really important that you have an outlet for these feelings – speak to someone you trust, do not bottle them up.
- Seek professional help if you still feel that the birth trauma has got in the way of your relationship with your baby, and you need extra support. Although the birth may not been how you have hoped, with the right support you and your baby can come through.

### FURTHER READING

Bruijn, M. & Gould, D. (2016) *How to heal a Bad Birth: Making Sense, Making Peace and Moving On.*  
Cree, M. (2015) *The Compassionate Mind Approach to Postnatal Depression.*  
Daws, D. & A.R. Rementeria (2015) *Finding your way with your Baby: The Emotional Life of Parents and Babies.*  
Svanberg, E (2019) *Why Birth Trauma Matters*



Mindfulness techniques offer something that parents can do themselves during birth. Using techniques such as mindful breathing, noting the pause in the breath can feel empowering. Such techniques can trigger the parasympathetic ('rest and digest') response so can help reduce stress. They are also accessible and practical; and can be done anywhere at any time.

Some mindfulness practices are not advised for use after a traumatic event, but grounding techniques such as looking for all of the objects in a room which are a certain colour can be helpful.

Mindfulness works well with other therapeutic preparations and approaches, so can be part of a wider offering. It also is a practice so needs to be developed over time in order to be of most use, ideally through pregnancy or before. As well as being beneficial in pregnancy and birth it can be very useful in helping with postnatal adjustments and parenting.

## FURTHER READING

Apps such as Calm, Headspace and Nourish are accessible and affordable ways to practice.

Local classes and practitioners can support in finding a comfortable way to practice.

The Minded Institute offers evidence based practices

This exercise is designed to increase awareness of breathing, triggering the para-sympathetic nervous system (inner calm), enabling a labouring mother to endure the physical sensations of labour and cope better with challenges or changes as or when they occur. Please ask someone to read this to you:

'To start, bring your attention to your breath and see if you can observe the breath despite any other distracting sensations in your body. Focus on the passage the breath takes as it enters your nose, travelling through to your lungs, and then the path through from your chest, your throat and your mouth as you exhale. On the next inhale, notice if the air feels cool or fresh as you breath in and how your ribcage expands, then follow it's warm passage when leaving your body and your diaphragm drops down into your belly.

Take a few more conscious breaths, focusing on the natural rhythm your body sets as you trigger your natural calm and oxygenate every cell and muscle in your body, allowing you to relax a little more. Breathing In, pausing a moment and breathing out. Noticing the pauses between each inhalation and exhalation. A brief moment of stillness between each breath, bringing your attention to each moment. Being present in your breath. Not trying to change how you breathe, not judging how you breathe, but being pleasantly aware of each breath and the calming, relaxation it gives your mind and your body. A focus in this moment, of life-giving, soothing breath. Allowing yourself to remain focused on the breath and knowing that by doing this, you are in control. You are calming, softening and relaxing into every moment. Every sensation your body brings is softened into because of your breath and how you are consciously choosing to be mindful of your breath.

Give yourself permission to direct your attention back to your breath if your mind wanders or you find yourself fixating on any distracting sensations. With kindness and self compassion you are able to choose to return to your breathing again and again as many times as you need. Counting each breath. Bringing your mind and body into balance simply by choosing to notice how you breathe. Where you breathe. And what you feel when you breathe. See if you can direct the breath into any physical sensations you feel. Using your breath as a calming anchor. Stilling you, rooting and grounding you gently into the moment. Moment by moment. Slowing your mind down, almost going into it frame by frame. Knowing that by breathing this way you are filling your body with the oxygen it needs to calm, soften and nourish you and your baby. Naturally letting go of any tension and distancing from any thoughts you may notice. They are just thoughts. Observing, instead of absorbing. Stepping back. Watching. Waiting until it all fades away. Then choosing to focus on the breath again. Embracing every sensation. Not trying to fight it or change it in any way. Accepting that your body is functioning the only way it knows how and that's okay. Grateful for your body and accepting this process as normal, in this moment. Scan your body and see if you can notice other sensations. Normal sensations such as how your shoulders feel and let them loosen if you notice any tension. Then move to Your jaw. Your neck. Your back. Your Chest. Your belly. Your Your arms and your hands. Your legs, feet and toes. Sense your whole body as one. All connected. All relaxed in this moment.

Allowing a little smile as you acknowledge how it feels to just be in the moment. Not in the past. Not in the future. Simply here. Right now. Calm. Body softening. Mind sNow open your eyes and be aware of your surroundings. Pressing "Pause" on the world around you as you take time to notice all that you can see; all the colours, the textures, the shapes. Take your time. Softening into the experience. With no judgement, bring your focus onto one thing in particular and really look at it, as if you're seeing it for the first time. What does it really look like? Hard? Soft? Shiny? Curved? Straight? Allow your focus to soften into what you see. Close your eyes again if you feel the desire to.

Now sense what you can hear. Where are those sounds coming from? Are there varying tones within the sound? Louder? Softer? Higher? Lower? Is it familiar to you? Accepting it all in this moment, as it is. Breathe it in. Notice where you are in every sensory detail... saying to yourself "May I be safe, May I be calm, May I be balanced, May I be still"

Thank you for taking the time to do this exercise and well done for taking time for yourself. Continue to use this technique as many times as you need throughout your childbirth and at any other time you need to find your inner calm, balance and peace.'