

Birth Trauma/Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Women can find their experience of childbirth stressful and even traumatic.

Stress and trauma can have a significant negative impact on the well-being of the body, mind and spirit. There are, therefore a range of symptoms that may be experienced by a woman whose birth experience has affected her in this way. Below are a list of some of the common reactions experienced by women.

Signs of PTSD

1. Reliving an aspect of the trauma: - this may take the form of recurrent intrusive memories, flashbacks or nightmares. There may be distress/ anxiety/ panic on exposure to things that remind them of the event, such as a hospital.
2. Persistent avoidance of anything that reminds them of the trauma. This can include not wanting to talk about the birth, and maybe one reason why women don't seek help. They may desire to have another child but be afraid of exposing themselves to the risk of another traumatic event. They may also try to numb the painful emotions, with a resultant numbing of all the emotions, so they may feel unable to love the baby. They may even dissociate from their memories of the event and be unable to remember part or all of it.
3. Persistent increased arousal including difficulty sleeping or concentrating, irritability or sudden bursts of anger or tears. They maybe hyper-vigilant about themselves or their babies (being on guard all the time).

These responses to the birth trauma can occur soon after the birth or be delayed for many months. They can persist for years if not addressed. Once they emerge they can significantly reduce a woman's joy in life, and negatively affect her relationship with her baby and her relationship with others (eg. partner). A lot of women end up with signs of depression, and the signs maybe confused with Postnatal Depression.

It is estimated that PTSD affects 7% of mothers. However, many more women show some of the responses typical of PTSD but not all. Women in the 'not quite clinical PTSD' zone are also very much in need of having their feelings acknowledged. Like women with PTSD, they need help and support in dealing with the trauma and their response to it.

Childbirth can also trigger memories of earlier emotional, physical or sexual trauma that have not been resolved.

Factors causing PTSD

It is very important to acknowledge that women are individuals, and will vary in their emotional and physical responses to events during childbirth. What one woman may perceive as traumatic, another may not. However, it is the individual woman's feelings and responses that are of paramount importance. Below is a list of some of the things that may be experienced by a woman as stressful and traumatising:

- Managed labour (drips, monitors, hospital)
- Induction
- Inadequate pain relief
- Feelings of loss of control
- Assisted delivery (forceps, ventouse)
- Caesarean delivery
- Episiotomy
- Vaginal examinations
- Impersonal, overly professional or judgmental attitude of staff
- Not being believed or listened to
- Lack of explanations or consent

- Being unable to move around freely
- With holding of food and water
- Placed in a wheel chair
- Lack of attention to dignity eg. no coverings
- Multi handling, numerous changes of staff, not being introduced, superfluous staff in room as observers
- True obstetric emergencies (fear for life of baby/ own life/; absent partner or support person)
- Prolonged latent phase - demoralisation
- Conflicting advice
- SCBU/NICU
- Severe postnatal anaemia or haemorrhage
- Poor postnatal care
- Previous birth trauma
- Unmet need to debrief

THE IMPORTANCE OF BIRTH REVIEWING/DEBRIEFING

After any highly emotional event, there is a need to share the experience and to have one's feelings acknowledged. Having a baby is one of these times: it is a monumental experience in any woman's life. It is emotionally beneficial for most women to debrief after childbirth. Those who had a stressful experience may need to talk it through many times. Friends and family may not understand how a woman is feeling, after all, she and the baby are 'OK'.

Birth reporting, reviewing/debriefing has been shown to reduce the occurrence of PND. It is also effective in reducing the severity of PTSD.

All women should have the opportunity to talk over their birth experience anytime, especially in the early postnatal days, with one or more people with whom the mother feels comfortable

Birth Trauma Support Group

We are mothers who have had stressful and traumatic birth experiences that affected our lives negatively for months or years afterwards. As a result of our experiences we are passionate about informing the community about PTSD.

We are also passionate about providing confidential and emotional support to other women who have felt the same way about their birth experiences. We help by sharing common experiences and feelings. We are NOT trained counsellors or therapists.

OUR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To inform and educate the community (public and health professionals) on how to recognize Birth Trauma/PTSD and how it can occur, and provide information on preventative measures and treatments available
- To support women who have had a traumatic birth experience and to help them to get the support they need.
- To keep up to date with information on PTSD - research, treatments, books
- We would like to see all women have the option of a birth review.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

It is important to find someone who is sympathetic and understanding. You may find these options useful:

- Counsellor, especially if they have experience with trauma
- GP, obstetrician or midwife
- Social Worker or psychologist
- Early Childhood Nurse
- Family and Friends (although unbiased support is needed)

- Local Community Support Centre
- Lifeline

To contact us:

Birth Trauma Support Group

Email: birtrasup@yahoo.com.au

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Birth Trauma Support Group
Supporting women & educating the community

Bad Birth Experience?

Childbirth is a monumental event in any woman's life. Every woman's experience of pregnancy, birth and mothering is unique.

Unfortunately for some women it can also be a traumatic event or period in their lives.

How traumatic your birth experience has been cannot be 'measured' or "judged" by others but is known only by *you* the person who has experienced it.

We thank Traumatic And Birth Stress(TABS) in New Zealand for allowing us to use their information to produce this pamphlet.
www.tabs.org.nz

