

Looking after your mental health in the early weeks after a traumatic birth

Catherine Green and Ellen Craig

A traumatic birth can feel like an emotional shock. Birth was not 'meant' to be this way so it can feel understandably hard to make sense of what has happened or how you are feeling. This can be doubly difficult when you add in the pressure of trying to get on and care for your new baby, recover physically or navigate other people's opinions and feelings. All of this takes immense energy and especially so after trauma.

You are not alone - at least 25% of women and birthing people report their birth as traumatic, usually because some aspect of their experience left them feeling intensely afraid, helpless or out of control. A proportion of birth partners will also report birth as traumatic. Every person reacts to trauma in their own way and what felt traumatic to one person may not feel that way to another. It is certainly not for other people to judge what was or wasn't traumatic for you. What matters most is your individual experiences and what they meant to you personally.

You are not alone – 25% of women experience birth as traumatic

This handout will describe some common reactions to birth trauma and how to look after your emotional wellbeing in the early weeks after birth. Although the feelings can take some time to die down most people will recover naturally after a stressful event and the tips described here are designed to help that. Some people may need additional psychological support if there are persisting difficulties. If you have been struggling with any of the issues outlined below for a month or longer after birth please see the section at the end for details of what help is available.

This handout is yours to keep so feel free to highlight, underline or make notes on it. People sometimes find that thinking or reading about trauma can remind them of their own traumatic experiences. It may be helpful to read this handout at a pace that feels manageable to you or with the support of someone else.



Understanding how you might be feeling

It is normal to experience a whole host of unpleasant feelings, thoughts and sensations in the immediate days and weeks after a trauma of any kind – this is your body and brain's way of beginning to come to terms with what has happened and putting the memory of the event in the past.

After a traumatic birth experience it is common for:

- Memories, images or thoughts about what happened to come into your mind even when you don't want them to. They can feel very 'now' as if they are happening again.
- People to feel agitated and jumpy or as if they are on 'high alert'.
- People to feel cut-off or numb, as if they are just 'going through the motions'.
- Strong emotions or bodily sensations to pop up. These might be linked with feelings of fear, loss, shame, guilt and/or anger. There may be an obvious trigger e.g. a particular thought, memory or situation (e.g. being with your baby) or it may simply feel like they come out of the blue for no reason.
- Concentration and sleep to be affected.
- A person's sense of themselves, their world and / or their future to feel changed in some way.
- People to dwell on what happened and go over aspects of it in their mind e.g. "If only....; Why..."; What if?..."
- People to feel cut off and distant from other people including their baby.

Although none of these experiences are pleasant they are normal. They are a natural, human reaction to extreme stress. They do not mean you are bad, losing control or any less of a mother or parent. So remember:

There is no right way to feel after birth trauma – try to treat your experiences with compassion not criticism

We know that being hard on ourselves for feeling (or perhaps not feeling things) after a distressing experience makes it more difficult to come to terms with. Try to think about what you would say to a friend or loved one who is going through something similar or imagine someone who you think of as empathic, warm and supportive – what might they say to you right now?

Coping with intrusive memories and flashbacks

Why are these common after trauma?

When we experience something traumatic it is hard for our brains to take in what is happening as it is focused on trying to respond to the threat facing us. It doesn't have an opportunity to organise the different parts of our experience into a complete memory so it can be filed away properly.

Usually this means that, to begin with at least, memories after trauma feel and behave quite different to memories of other non-traumatic experiences. They can seem very vivid, have a 'nowness' quality to them and are easily triggered meaning they pop up when we don't want them to.

For these memories to feel and behave more like other memories, our brain needs to pull together all the different parts of our experience – i.e. what we saw, heard, smelt, felt etc at the time – and put it together with what we know now. A bit like components being pulled together on a factory conveyor belt. As this is happening parts of our experience can pop into our awareness often without warning. This is of course not pleasant but it is normal. It is a sign our brain is working hard to try and help us get the memory of what happened in better shape. This way it can be properly stored away with other memories from the past.

How some ways of coping sometimes don't help

It makes sense that we would want to try and control or avoid upsetting memories. Common strategies might include trying to suppress them or avoid situations that trigger them. Sometimes these might feel helpful in the short term but unfortunately they can actually mean more thoughts and memories pop up. All of this can make it harder for your brain to do what it needs to do – suppressing memories is a bit like pushing components off the conveyor belt – which means you suffer for longer than necessary. Another consequence of trying to control the memories is that it takes up valuable time and energy and can make life more limited for you and your new baby.

Another way of managing the memories

A more effective way of treating the intrusive memories is to try and stand back and observe them rather than trying to control, analyse them or push them away. So where possible a "hands off approach". You might want to label them "that's just part of the memory again" or visualise them as something external to you that moves through your mind e.g. leaves on a stream, clouds in the sky, trains coming through a station etc. You might also find it helpful to focus on things which remind you that the trauma is over and that you are safe now.

The importance of support and not giving up on what matters to you

After a traumatic birth experience and especially when there is a new baby to take care of any kind of routine or energy for even basic activities can go out the window. It might feel tempting to shut yourself away, avoid talking about what has happened or give up on the things you enjoy or have planned with your baby. This is understandable if you feel the trauma has changed things irreversibly or robbed you of precious first moments with your baby. However, all of this can just leave you feeling more isolated and upset and that it is impossible for life to move on.

Stay connected to people you care about and ask for help

Where possible try to stay connected with the people you care about. If it feels safe to, talk about what you have experienced and how you are feeling with people you trust to support you. Is there helpful practical care and support that they could offer you? e.g. looking after your baby whilst you have some time to yourself, cooking meals and so on. Or perhaps just a space to listen or ways in which they can help you to feel calm and cared about?.

Consider Peer Support

You might also find it helpful to access support from others who have had a similar experience to you - there are list of organisations you may find helpful at the end of this handout. Others have found it helpful to express their feelings in a journal. Research shows that support from others after a traumatic experience including birth trauma is key to recovery.

Keep doing the things that matter to you

Try to think about small tasks you could do for yourself and with your baby. Keep on top of the basics if you can - e.g. eating regularly, resting when possible, showering and brushing your teeth, gentle exercise.

Rebuilding or 'reclaiming' your life is an important step towards recovery after trauma. What did you used to enjoy? What made you feel good? What had you hoped to do with your baby? What have you stopped doing because of the trauma? If some activities are impossible with a young baby or because of how you are feeling physically at the moment are there any alternatives?

Try to start simple and with one or two small specific goals that feel realistic and manageable. Consider how other people can support with these things too.



What help is available?

Psychological interventions

Psychological interventions are 'talking therapies' that address difficult thoughts and feelings. There are evidence-based therapies that are proven to be effective in helping people with PTSD - trauma focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (tfCBT) or Eye Movement Desensitisation Therapy (EMDR). They can help you make sense of what happened, put the memories into the past and get on with enjoying life with your baby. These can be accessed via your GP or some services accept self-referrals. If you are pregnant or have a young baby you should be prioritised for treatment.

Medication

Medication is not the first line of treatment for PTSD but for some people medication can be helpful alongside other support, especially if their mood is also very low. Speak to your GP if you would like to understand more about the medication options which might help.

Reviewing your birth

Most hospitals offer a service to talk through your birth experience. This is sometimes called a 'Birth Reflections' or 'Birth Afterthoughts' service. This can be helpful if you want to better understand what happened in your birth, why certain decisions were made and answer any questions you may have about future deliveries. Contact your maternity unit or ask your health visitor or midwife about what's available locally

Peer Support

Connecting with other people who have had a similar experience has also been shown to be very helpful. Here are some organisations dedicated to supporting people after a traumatic birth you may find useful:

The Birth Trauma Association: www.thebirthtraumaassociation.org.uk

Make Birth Better: www.makebirthbetter.org

Talk to your midwife, health visitor, GP or mental health team to discuss how you can be referred for any of the above help.

If you need urgent help with how you are feeling, please attend your local A&E department or dial 999.