



Australasian

birthtrauma

Association



FAMILY & FRIENDS

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birthtrauma.org.au

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If you are reading this then you may have someone close to you that has been impacted by a difficult birth experience, be it a partner, loved one or someone that you care for.

It is often hard to comprehend what they are feeling, and our aim is to provide you with some information and guidance to help you take their hand and walk this journey alongside them.

WHAT IS BIRTH TRAUMA?

We, at ABTA, define birth trauma as a wound, serious injury or damage - it can be physical or psychological (deeply upsetting and distressing) or a combination of both. Both mother and the father/partner can be affected by birth trauma.

Each woman will have her birth experience dream, and then the reality. With many women who have experienced birth trauma, the disconnect between their ideal birth and the reality can make them feel broken and at fault and leave them in a vulnerable emotional state. Alongside

psychological trauma, women may also have to manage physical injuries. We will help you understand the two types of birth trauma – physical and psychological. Each has a variety of signs and symptoms and the two can very much be intertwined, making their identification and management complex.

With our guidance and support we hope you can recognise these signs and begin the journey with your loved one in the management and support you both require.

Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma may arise as a result of an extreme disconnect between an expectation of what would happen and what actually happened during the birth. For example, huge value could be placed on having a calm and natural birth and if this type of imagined birth doesn't occur, many new mothers feel a sense of failure which can be made worse by feelings of not being prepared for an outcome that they didn't expect.

The shock of what actually happened during birth can bring about a number of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and other disorders. Some people experience severe emotional distress after a traumatic birth even though there was no physical trauma. It is also important to note that trauma can continue long after the birth, with distinct psychological symptoms.

Signs and Symptoms¹

- Feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror in reaction to reminders of the experience, for example words, smells, rooms, clinicians, a particular hospital
- Fear and anxiety about going outside
- Poor self-image
- Memories (flashbacks) of the delivery during sexual relations
- Trying to push feelings away and getting on with looking after your baby
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- Feelings of isolation
- Irritability
- Feelings of guilt
- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Avoiding reminders of the traumatic birth such as the location where it happened or a tendency to become stressed or anxious when being close to the location. Triggers like this can show up in different ways
- Feeling unemotional, numb or detached from others, activities, or surroundings
- Alcohol and drug misuse
- Distress caused by the physical birth injuries that you may be managing.
- Your partner or other birthing support person may also be traumatised, e.g. by the experience of fear for the survival of you or the baby during the labour or birth.

Physical Trauma

Physical injuries are a direct result of the birthing process. Physical trauma may or may not be identified immediately, given that it can be hard to articulate the symptoms, and separate them from what women 'normally' experience after a vaginal birth. Furthermore, a diagnosis of physical injury can be very confronting.

Signs and Symptoms

- Continuing pain around the site of the episiotomy or tear in the perineum (between vagina and anus) after birth
- Urinary or faecal incontinence
- Difficulty opening and emptying bowels
- Pain or difficulty having sex
- Constant lower back pain
- Awareness of a bulge or lump at the vaginal opening
- A dragging/heavy feeling in the pelvis or a sense that something is 'falling out' – this symptom may be increased by standing, lifting, tiredness or at period time
- Vaginal or pelvic floor muscle laxity
- Sweating, shaking, headaches, dizziness, gastro-intestinal upsets and chest pains not connected with medical conditions.



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SEEKING HELP

It is important to understand that birth injuries resulting from birth trauma may include damage to the pelvic floor or perineal area and require expert medical advice and assessment, and the effects may continue long after the birth.

It's a good idea to ensure you know exactly what your loved one went through, especially if you weren't in the room during the baby's delivery.

Knowing what happened to both the mother and child during the birth is the first step in identifying when something isn't quite right. Don't be afraid to ask questions but be patient – this can be a difficult process. If the mother identifies with any of the symptoms listed above, your next step should be to encourage her to speak to a health professional

Getting help and support is key to successfully managing birth trauma. Due to the nature and complexity of each person's individual trauma, your loved one will need time, support, understanding and love from those closest to them.

Alongside this, you will benefit from the support, guidance and treatment from the right health professionals, including the Australasian Birth Trauma Association.

We can help connect you and your loved one to a community who have been impacted by birth trauma across social and online platforms.

Healthcare Professionals

There are many different health professionals who can assist and provide treatment in the management of birth trauma. It can be confusing to consider what type of doctor or specialist needs to be seen, who to speak to, and who specialises in what.

Above all, be patient – healing takes time, and working together will make this journey easier for all involved.

Visit the Resources page on the ABTA website to access "Your Healthcare Guide in Birth Trauma Care" - a guide to help you determine the types of health professionals that may be able to assist you.

Birth Partners

Birth partners can also experience trauma from childbirth and are too often forgotten. Watching someone you love go through a painful birth experience can be extremely difficult. You may feel very confused because you do not understand the nature of your partners' psychological trauma and/or physical injuries after the birth, or you may have feared for your partner and baby's well-being.

It is very important that you take the time to understand your own experience. You may wish to make an appointment with your GP to get help and support. Unfortunately, postnatal depression and anxiety in men is not always diagnosed accurately. Affected couples should seek expert advice from mental health professionals.

Visit our Fathers and Partners page on the website for more information.

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HOW CAN YOU HELP?

We have created a guide to assist in your journey to support your loved one. Please let us know if there is anything we have missed, we welcome the input of our amazing community.

1

Check in regularly

Ask her how things are going. She may look okay on the outside but she can still feel the need to talk.

3

Practical physical help

A change in physical capacity can impact day to day life and there may be some things that she may not be able to do. It can be beneficial for women to avoid any activities that create downward pressure on the pelvic floor. Strenuous activities such as lifting heavy objects, including lifting a baby or child, is a perfect example.

Be more involved – provide a home cooked meal instead of flowers or presents and help around the house. She may need time and support until she has the knowledge and ability to begin managing her symptoms and moving forward.

5

Doctor's Appointments

It may benefit you both to attend the initial appointments together, so that you both have a full understanding of the physical injuries she may have, the required next steps, and follow ups.

Once you have been given a specialist referral, we recommend finding out more to ensure that they have the experience and expertise you require.

Birth Trauma is still a relatively new area of focus and finding the right healthcare professional is an extremely important part of the healing process. If you are unsure, it may also be useful to seek a second opinion.

Support your loved one in following professional advice and encourage her to do so.

If the doctor says no heavy lifting (such as carrying shopping or putting out the washing) that does mean no heavy lifting.

7

Intimacy

When it comes to intimacy, having little interest in sex or physical contact is very common for most new mums, especially those experiencing birth trauma. Be patient and talk through ways in which you can love one another. Massage can often help you both feel connected and feel safe and secure. Share a few cuddles on the couch.

The words "I love you" and "I am here for you" can often make the toughest moments feel calm. She needs to know that your love hasn't changed especially during this difficult time.

2

Encouragement

Encourage her to look at this website and talk to us if she hasn't already reached out.

4

Be prepared

For affected women there may be triggers that can cause her to act out of character. For example, a woman sitting serenely with her tiny, brand new baby may remind your loved one her of her own (negative) postpartum experience. Feelings of guilt, not feeling good enough, anger or sadness can be triggered and she may just need to remove herself from such a situation.

As a support person, be prepared to quickly leave the coffee shop/park/cafe at a moment's notice because of these 'triggers'. Giving her time and trying to understand will help. If you are both able to identify what the trigger is/was, this may help you be prepared for future experiences.

6

Taking care of her

We have spoken to many women who have been impacted by birth trauma and you may find the following statements useful in providing insight to her current feelings.

- A traumatic birth is not something you can plan for.
- Everyone heals differently, please give me the time I need.
- I'm not the person that I used to be – the change is as daunting for me as it is you.
- Some days I can be completely emotionless and other days I am an emotional wreck
- Please acknowledge that I need to talk about what happened to me.
- There is more to birth than having a healthy baby.
- Trauma is real and the mother needs compassion, kindness and lots of care.
- When I say I am not coping, please acknowledge how unfair/daunting/overwhelming the situation is, and ask how you can help.
- When you respond with 'you're doing so well!' Or 'look at how well you're coping' you minimise my feelings. Please acknowledge how I feel.
- You may hear of someone having a similar experience to my own that wasn't traumatised by it. That's okay, we all process things differently. It does not mean that I shouldn't feel the way I do.

8

A guide on what to say (and what not to say)

What she needs to hear

- It's not your fault
- Forgive yourself for not knowing what you didn't know.

What not to say or do

- At least you have a healthy baby (any sentence that starts with 'at least' is not helpful)
- You'll forget about the birth
- Just get on with it
- There are a lot of women worse off
- You had bad luck
- Ignore or dismiss her feelings.

Reference: 1. The Royal Women's Hospital, Victoria, Baby Blues. Available at <https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/mental-health-pregnancy/baby-blues> accessed May 2020.