

Birth Trauma

Birth trauma is a form of psychological and emotional distress which can occur anytime during the pregnancy, birth or postnatal period. It can have devastating effects on mothers, both in the short and long term. Research suggests that about 4-6% of women who give birth go on to develop postnatal PTSD, or birth trauma. That works out at about 30,000 new cases every year in the UK.

An estimated 30% experience some symptoms of PTSD, but not the full-blown condition.

Women from different cultures, including Muslim & Black women in the United Kingdom, are particularly at risk of suffering negative consequences related to birth trauma such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a byproduct of the compounding effects of implicit bias, prejudice, racism and structural inequalities that exist within society, and are reflected in their healthcare experience.



The Birth Trauma Problem

about 4-6% of women who give birth develop post-traumatic stress disorder

around 30% of all women find some aspect of their birth traumatic

Black Women & women of colour may be at greater risk of traumatic experiences

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What Causes Birth Trauma?

- A difficult labour with a long and painful delivery
- An unplanned caesarean section
- Emergency treatment
- An unexpected diagnosis
- Hyperemesis gravidarum
- Other shocking, unexpected and traumatic experiences during birth.
- Neonatal complication
- Circumstances specific to the mother
- Impersonal treatment or problems with staff attitudes
- Not being listened to
- Lack of privacy and dignity
- Fear for baby's safety
- Stillbirth
- Birth of a baby with a disability resulting from a traumatic birth
- Poor postnatal care
- Previous trauma (for example, in childhood, with a previous birth or domestic violence)



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What Are The Symptoms of Birth Trauma?

The symptoms of birth trauma are split into 4 categories. Each category has a sub-set of symptoms that effects the individual in a debilitating way. For many individuals, it can completely alter how they experience their life.

1- Re-living

- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Significant distress at trauma event reminders
- Intrusive thoughts
- Physiological changes such as pain, trembling, sweating, palpitations or nausea

2- Feeling on edge

- Panicking when reminded of the trauma
- Anxiety
- Being easily upset or angry
- Hyper-vigilance
- Self-destructive behaviour
- Difficulty concentrating
- Being easily startled
- Difficulty sleeping
- Aggressive behaviour



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3- Avoidance

- Avoidance of circumstances that remind you of the trauma
- Unable to remember details
- Unable to express your feelings
- Feeling detached from your body
- Using addictive substances to avoid memories
- Feeling numb
- Feeling the need to keep busy

4- Difficult feelings

- Distrust
- Guilt
- Shame
- Lack of perceived safety
- Feeling misunderstood
- Self-blame
- Anger
- Sadness and loss

Effects of birth trauma

Women who experience birth trauma often find it difficult to bond with their babies. They also often avoid hospitals, which means missing important appointments, have relationship difficulties as well as debilitating physical symptoms. This often compounds feelings of sadness, guilt and shame. Women from cultures that don't often openly address mental and emotional health problems, may feel a sense of burden to pretend everything is going well particularly to 'outsiders'. Health care professionals may miss these women due to conscious bias, that fact that she may present well or lack of cultural competence and communication.

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Birth trauma treatments

There are a few treatments that you may be offered for postnatal PTSD. Understanding the full scope of what is available and what is effective, will help you decide what is best for your healing journey.

Talking therapies:

EMDR- (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) is a comprehensive psychotherapy that helps you process and recover from past experiences that are traumatic.

CBT- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave.

TBR 3 Step rewind- Rewind is a 3 step treatment that lifts the symptoms of PTSD. It is a safe and natural way that allows the associated fear to be released from the memory.

Group/peer support- is often used in conjunction with individual therapy. Women often find it useful to open up and share experiences and resources with peers. This can provide a sense of belonging and community.

Medication:

Medication is not usually given to treat PTSD. But if you are also suffering from anxiety or depression, you may be offered anti-depressants.

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Additional birth trauma resources

AIMS-

<https://www.aims.org.uk/>

Make birth Better-

<https://www.makebirthbetter.org/>

The Birth Trauma Association-

<https://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk/>

Mind-

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Birth Trauma Association-

<https://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk/>

Birth Rights-

<https://www.birthrights.org.uk/>