

# Recovering from a Traumatic Birth – Information for you and people close to you

An information guide



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## What is trauma?

*A traumatic experience temporarily overwhelms your nervous system causing unfamiliar, intense, confusing or frightening feelings.*

A traumatic event can be any shocking, frightening or dangerous experience that is psychologically and emotionally overwhelming. It can involve the feeling that you or someone else might die or be badly hurt. These can be natural events such as an earthquake, or something that is caused by a person or persons such as a robbery. It can also happen after a difficult or frightening birth. These symptoms can affect both survivors themselves and/or other people present at the traumatic event.

Most people who experience trauma will go on to make a full recovery -even if they feel highly distressed at first, and this leaflet will give you some information that can help you with this, or signpost you to further help if you don't begin to feel better.

## Was your birth traumatic?

You or your baby may have experienced an emergency. You may have had feelings of being out of control, and may have felt very frightened. You may have felt that others didn't understand what you were going through or what you needed. You may have felt that you couldn't speak out or weren't heard, or were watching yourself rather than really being there fully. Or you may be the birth partner of someone who had a baby, and witnessed the trauma.

It is not possible for someone else to predict who will feel that they had a traumatic labour or birth -for example, just because you and your baby are healthy, or you had a normal delivery, does not mean that you don't feel traumatised.

*If you feel that your birth was traumatic, then it was for you.*

### **Common responses to trauma – Acute Stress Reaction:**

#### **Physical :**

- Shakiness or trembling.
- Palpitations, shallow breathing or dizziness.
- Gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea or diarrhoea.
- Not sleeping.
- Loss of appetite.
- Becoming jumpy.
- Numbness.

#### **Psychological :**

- Shock and disbelief.
- A feeling of intense relief that the experience is over.
- Having trouble concentrating.
- Feeling anxious, on edge, sad, angry or numb.
- Feelings of overwhelming sadness.
- Intrusive memories that come out of the blue.
- Vivid dreams or nightmares.
- Re-experiencing the event as if it were happening all over again.
- Guilt that you didn't act or cope how you would have wanted to, or that you somehow let someone else down.
- Continually thinking about what happened including unpleasant thoughts or images.
- Feelings of shame - especially about things that you couldn't or can't control.

- Feelings that come and go in waves, with times where you feel jumpy and anxious, and at other times feel numb or disconnected.
- Feeling less connected, or overprotective, towards the baby.
- Avoiding things that remind you of the birth.

## **What can help?**

- There is no right or wrong way to respond so try not to tell yourself what you should be thinking or feeling.
- Give yourself time to heal and to mourn any losses that you feel.
- Remember that even the most intense feelings will pass.
- Accept comfort and support from others.
- Take time out.
- Do some gentle activity.
- Return to some normal routines or activities.
- Eat regularly – especially nutritious food.
- Use moments of free time to relax –have a warm bath, read a book or watch an uplifting film.
- Take time to talk about what happened with people you feel comfortable with. It may help to go through events with someone else who was there as this can help in beginning to understand and accept what happened. Sometimes people find it helps to have a birth debrief at the hospital to help to fully understand what actually happened. Ask your community midwife or health visitor about this.
- Try to develop self-compassion and acceptance – you have survived a time of suffering. Even just getting up and doing simple things is an achievement.
- If you can, hug or be close to those you love, including pets.

## **Things to avoid:**

- Bottling up your feelings
- Avoiding anything at all to do with traumatic events
- Drug or alcohol use
- Dwelling excessively on the events

## **How can other people help?**

- Helping out with practical things like household chores or with the baby - if that feels right for you.
- Asking how you are and then just listening if you want to talk.

## **What is Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS)?**

For most people, the feelings of numbness, confusion, despair or guilt will begin to fade within a short amount of time.

However, if after some time, the feelings remain just as intense or become overwhelming, or if you continue to have intrusive thoughts, nightmares or you avoid more and more things that might remind you of the birth, then you may be developing post-traumatic stress and need help from a professional.

## **After 4-6 weeks, concerning signs might be:**

- You are having trouble functioning in day-to-day life.
- You are still having flashbacks, nightmares or terrifying memories.
- You are finding it harder to be close to people.
- You are experiencing suicidal thoughts.
- You find yourself avoiding more and more things that remind you of the traumatic events.

## Helpful techniques if you feel distressed:

### Grounding techniques for coping with flashbacks or acute distress:

- Take a good look around the room. If it's dark, put the light on. Tell yourself the worst is over: that was then and this is now.
- Stand up and move around; stretch, stamp your feet, run on the spot, clap your hands, dance or walk. Remind yourself where you are.
- Use **54321**:

**5 – Look** around for five things you can see and say them out loud (e.g. I see the computer; I see the window).

**4 – Feel.** Pay attention to your body and notice four things you can feel and say them out loud (e.g. I feel my feet inside my socks, I feel my hands touch my legs; I feel the air coming in through my nose).

**3 – Listen** for three sounds inside and outside the room (e.g. I hear a clock ticking; I hear the traffic outside).

**2 – Smell.** Find something nice to smell, if you can't, then name two favourite smells (e.g. I smell fabric conditioner on my sleeve; I love the smell of freshly mown grass).

**1 – Name one good thing** about yourself (e.g. I am strong; I have a good sense of humour).

**Soothing breathing – this can be done briefly for a few minutes, or can be done for longer if you have time.**

Settle yourself in an upright but relaxed position, ideally sitting with your feet planted firmly onto the floor, with your head upright and facing forward. If you can't manage this, then lying comfortably is fine too.

Think about the feeling just after you have done something hard and give a long, big sigh of relief. This long, slow out-breath is the opposite of the fight or flight system and is connected to your inner soothing system. The long, slow out-breath therefore calms and settles you and can help you to remain calm and grounded through difficult situations.

Now gently close your eyes if you want or just stare at a spot ahead of you. Imagining your mind is like a warm spotlight, shine the light onto your breath. Just notice the sensations of breathing in..... a moment's pause.....and then the sensations of breathing out. Notice your tummy rise and fall, the air coming in through your nose, and your lungs expand then release. Notice with an interested awareness and warmth, as if you were watching a small, sleeping animal. As your mind wanders, as it will many times, notice any thoughts you have and then just gently bring your attention back to your breath.

Imagine a soft ball or balloon inside your belly starting small and then becoming bigger when breathing in and smaller again when breathing out. Start to count while you breathe, and try and reach a slow count of four or five as you breathe in, and the same when breathing out. (It can help to start with a count of two in and two out and build up though three, four to five over time as your breathing slows).

Or if you like, you can imagine a child's drawing of a wavy line, with the 'up' and 'down' around the same height. Now imagine a ball rolling up and down the wave. In following this with your breath, you will match your breathing to the gentle wave.

You can use any of the images that you find the most useful, even thinking of the sound of gentle waves lapping onto the shore. Whichever image you use can allow you to slow and soften the breath, feeling the calmness that it brings to your whole body.

If you notice yourself finding this too difficult because of intrusive or distressing thoughts or self-criticism, then for a moment just concentrate on the feeling of the solidness of the floor and the chair supporting you. Keep returning to the breath whenever you can, because being able to master the ability to create this inner sense of feeling settled and calm by using the breath is a very powerful technique that you can have with you at all times.

## **Where to find help**

You can download a free guided relaxation first aid for panic at this web address - <https://www.get.gg/gallery1.htm>

**Birth Trauma Association** - [www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk](http://www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk)

**Bliss** - Guidance and support for sick or premature babies.  
[www.bliss.org.uk](http://www.bliss.org.uk)

**IAPT** talking therapies:

**Healthy Minds** - Counselling, CBT and Self-help. Manchester, Oldham, Bury.

**Thinking Ahead.** - Rochdale

**MIND** - Promoting and supporting people with mental health problems. [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**Pennine Acute Women and Children's Division counselling service** - For appointments ring 0161 720 2969.

**SANDS** - Stillbirth and neonatal death charity. [www.uk-sands.org](http://www.uk-sands.org)

**Saneline**- Out of hours mental health support line  
[www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)

**Samaritans** - 24-hour phone line offers a safe place to talk.  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**If you are having active suicidal thoughts, contact your GP, or go to A&E where there are mental health professionals who can see and assess you in an emergency.**

## **The future**

Remember that you survived something really tough so give yourself credit for that.

Most people do recover completely from traumatic experiences with time and support.

Look out for post-traumatic growth - perhaps your experience has brought you new perspective on the things that are really important to you, or has brought you some new knowledge or wisdom.

You may find that in time your insight means you are able to support and help others who have been through similar experiences.

**Notes:**

**If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service**

Jeśli angielski nie jest twoim pierwszym językiem i potrzebujesz pomocy, skontaktuj się z działem tłumaczeń ustnych i pisemnych

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**For general enquiries please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 0161 604 5897**

**For enquiries regarding clinic appointments, clinical care and treatment please contact 0161 624 0420 and the Switchboard Operator will put you through to the correct department / service**

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