Is birth trauma the same as Postnatal Depression (PND)?

No. Some of the symptoms are the same, but the two illnesses are distinct and need to be treated individually.

About half of women who experience birth trauma also experience PND because the symptoms of birth trauma can lead to depression. The main difference between the two is that birth trauma is characterised by the feeling that you’re reliving the trauma through flashbacks, intrusive thoughts or dreams.

What are the symptoms of birth trauma?

You may...

- Relive the worst parts of the birth over and over again, through flashbacks or nightmares
- Feel jumpy or over-anxious – you may become over-protective of your baby
- Find it hard to remember some parts of the birth
- Find it difficult to bond with your baby
- Feel depressed, irritable or angry
- Find it difficult to concentrate
- Find it hard to breastfeed

These symptoms can have a big effect on your day-to-day life. You might find it hard to get on with your partner, particularly if they don’t understand why you still keep thinking about the birth. You might avoid triggers that remind you of the birth – other women with babies, television programmes about birth, hospital appointments. Birth is completely unpredictable so you should never feel guilty about a traumatic birth but PTSD can make you feel that way. You might feel frightened about getting pregnant again and worry about having another traumatic birth.

Why can’t I get over my birth trauma?

Sometimes people close to you will tell you to stop dwelling on your bad birth experience or say: “All that matters is that you have a healthy baby”. They think that birth trauma or PTSD is a sign of weakness or inability to cope.

But PTSD isn’t something you can just choose not to have – symptoms such as flashbacks and anxiety are involuntary. Scans show that the brains of PTSD sufferers look differently from those of healthy people. These differences, in the bits of the brain that govern emotion and memory, are the reason people with PTSD continue to re-experience the terror they felt during their trauma, even though they are no longer under threat. People with PTSD need treatment if they are to get better.

How is birth trauma treated?

Two main treatments have been found to work:

- **Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).** This can help you to change how you think about your experience. Instead of focusing on the causes of your distress or symptoms in the past, it looks for ways to improve your state of mind now. It usually involves 8 to 12 sessions of up to an hour, over the course of two or three months.

- **Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR).** This is a way of moving your stopping your flashbacks and feelings of fear by moving them into your long-term memory store, using a technique that involves watching a moving object or listening to a series of taps through headphones. Although it sounds strange, many sufferers find it very effective.

You can ask for a referral to a CBT or EMDR specialist from your GP.

There is currently no medication that is proven to work with PTSD, but if you have other symptoms such as depression, you should discuss this with your healthcare provider.

I’d like to have another baby, but I’m scared. What can I do?

Some hospitals offer a service, sometimes called “Afterthoughts”, that enables you to go through your birth notes with a midwife or obstetrician. Some women find this helpful. It can help you to piece together missing information.

If you do get pregnant, it can be helpful to write down your fears and discuss them with your midwife during the antenatal period, around 20 weeks of pregnancy or sooner. You can work through your fears with her and discuss other options that you had perhaps not considered before.

In some areas of the country, you can ask for a referral to see a perinatal psychologist, who can support you through your pregnancy and teach you coping techniques.

See our leaflet **Having another baby after a traumatic birth for more information.**

Where can I get help if I have birth trauma?

If you’re having trouble getting over your birth experience, please remember, you are not alone. The BTA is here to offer support and advice to anyone who needs help coming to terms with a traumatic birth experience.

You should also talk to your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor about how you feel. Awareness of this problem varies enormously, so if you don’t feel that your health professional understands, please show them our leaflet or contact us for more advice.
About the Birth Trauma Association

The Birth Trauma Association (BTA) is a charity established in 2004 to support families who have been traumatised during childbirth. We are not trained counsellors, therapists or medical professionals. We are parents who do our best to support other parents who have been affected by a traumatic birth. The BTA is the only organisation in the UK dealing solely and specifically with this issue. Our work is focused on three main areas:

(1) Raising awareness of birth trauma
(2) Working to prevent it
(3) Supporting families in need

What is Birth Trauma?

Birth Trauma is another name for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after birth. In the UK alone, an estimated 20,000 women a year develop birth trauma. But even more – about 200,000 – feel traumatised by childbirth, and experience some PTSD symptoms. Some partners, too, suffer PTSD from witnessing a traumatic birth.

Examples of a traumatic birth could include:

- Lengthy labour or short and very painful labour
- Induction
- Instrumental delivery – ventouse and/or forceps
- Emergency Caesarean section
- Loss of blood after birth (postpartum haemorrhage)
- Poor pain relief
- Feelings of loss of control
- Feeling unsupported by staff, or that staff were hostile
- Fear of death or permanent damage
- Birth of a damaged baby (a disability resulting from birth trauma)
- Stillbirth
- Baby's stay in SCBU/NICU

Donations

We are a charity that relies on donations. Any donations to our funds will help us to continue our valuable work helping families traumatised during childbirth. You can donate online at:

www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk

Special Thanks

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"I had flashbacks of the final delivery for weeks afterwards and couldn't stop thinking about it."

"I blame myself for not having a good birth.
I feel a failure."

"I had problems breastfeeding my baby. I'm convinced this was down to a traumatic birth - it made me feel more of a failure as a mum."

"No one ever explained to me what I had gone through in the delivery room and I still don't fully understand."

www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk

support@birthtraumaassociation.org.uk

@BirthTrauma

Facebook Group

We also have a closed group on Facebook where Women with birth trauma can support each other. You can ask to join by searching for "Birth Trauma Association".

Facebook Page

We have a public-facing Facebook page, which we use to keep people up to date with news:

https://www.facebook.com/Birth-Trauma-Association-UK-496299280533226

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