



## What is Birth Trauma?

- There is no consistent definition of a “traumatic birth.”
- Women may perceive their birthing experience to be traumatic as a result of intervention during the process, the mode of birth and the way they were treated by healthcare professionals.
- However, some women who have no interventions may also perceive their experience to have been traumatic.
- Birth trauma is perceived to be in the ‘*eye of the beholder*’ (Beck, 2004)

## Common Experiences During “Traumatic” Childbirth

- Feeling invisible and Out of control
- No involvement in key decisions about the birth
- Feeling powerless
- Not being treated humanely
- Not asked for consent for people to watch/intervene
- Feeling degraded or violated – ‘*like a piece of meat*’
- Feeling trapped
- A ‘*Rollercoaster of emotions*’ - anxiety, panic, low mood

## Do I have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Are you experiencing the following symptoms?:

### *“Re-living”*

The persistent re-experiencing of the event by way of recurrent intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares. "Flashbacks" aren't always visual. They are intrusive memories of what you experienced during childbirth, essentially a reliving or replay of the experience, so can include sounds, smells and physical sensations.

### *Distress and Anxiety*

Distress, anxiety or panic when exposed to things which remind you of the birth. The "panic" can manifest itself in lots of different ways, depending on how you experience anxiety - it can involve a racing heart, difficulty breathing, tightness in the chest, shaking, sweating, feeling dizzy, light-headed or faint or feeling detached from oneself.

### *Avoidance, Blocking and Suppression*

This can include attempts to block or suppress difficult or distressing emotions and avoidance of talking about the birth with other people. Also, avoidance of activities or people that remind you of your experience.



## ***Physiological Symptoms***

Intrusive memories and the need to avoid any reminders of your traumatic experience, will often result in difficulties with sleeping and concentrating. You may also feel angry, irritable and be hyper vigilant (on the lookout for danger) or jumpy and easily startled.

### **Is this Normal?**

Symptoms of PTSD are normal following a traumatic experience. Almost everyone experiences intrusive reliving and high levels of anxiety. It is due to how our brains process information at times of extreme fear (when we're in "fight, flight, freeze" mode). It is not a sign of weakness.

### **Why won't my symptoms go away?**

The reliving symptoms of PTSD tend to persist as a result of avoidance, suppression and blocking. It is normal to not want to be reminded of something highly distressing but unfortunately, your brain has to process and make sense of your experience, before your high levels of distress and anxiety will alleviate.

When you "re-live" your traumatic experience, you are experiencing a re-activation of your threat system, which can make you think and feel as though you are in danger, and often look for ways to protect yourself from harm (which can make your symptoms worse).

### **What can I do to help myself?**

It will help to talk about and allow yourself to think about what has happened. Write out an account of your traumatic birth experience and read over it, if you feel able to.

Feelings of guilt or shame often prevent us from talking to other people about what we've experienced, but shutting yourself away can result in low mood, depression and certain beliefs about the experience being "stuck". For example, if you blame yourself for something that happened during your labour and you never speak to anyone else about it, there's no opportunity for anyone else to challenge it.

### **What can I do if my symptoms won't go away?**

It is likely that your intrusive memories, your distress and anxiety will alleviate over time. If you are not feeling any better a month after the birth of your child, then do find someone to speak to.

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

<https://www.makebirthbetter.org>