

Recovering from a difficult birth

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This leaflet aims to give you **information** about recovering from a **difficult birth**.

You may find this leaflet helpful if you have had a difficult experience of child birth. An experience that has affected how you feel and still bothers you a great deal a few months after the birth. If this is the case, it is important to tell your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor about how you are feeling. You may decide you need more support and want to be referred to a therapist. Your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor will be able to arrange this for you.

The reality of giving birth is often very different from women's hopes and expectations. This can be because of the type of delivery or because other aspects of the birth were not as you had planned (e.g. having a caesarean section when you wanted a natural delivery). Some aspects of the delivery may have been frightening and led you to fear for your own or your baby's life. These experiences can lead to feelings of sadness or anger about your birth experience. It can also leave you feeling quite traumatised.

If you have had a particularly difficult birth then it is normal to need time to come to terms with your experience. You may find it helpful to talk this over with your partner, friend or relative. There may be unanswered questions that you want to ask your Midwife, Health Visitor or GP. If, however, you find that several months have passed and you are still struggling to cope with your birth experience then this could be a sign that you have been traumatised and are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

PTSD is a type of psychological problem that can occur following a traumatic event. Below are some of the symptoms of PTSD that can be experienced following a traumatic birth experience:

1. 'Re-experiencing' the birth (the traumatic event)

Examples of re-experiencing include:

- Having unwanted pictures or images (often called flashbacks) of the birth coming into your mind
- Having upsetting dreams or nightmares about the birth or dreams about other things that upset you
- Feeling as if you are re-living the birth when you think about it
- Feeling very distressed at coming across situations or feelings that remind you of the birth
- Experiencing distressing physical reactions (e.g. heart beating faster, dizziness etc) when you are faced with memories of the birth or situations that remind you of it

Episodes of re-experiencing can occur 'out of the blue' or when you are reminded of the birth (e.g. by returning to the hospital, or by seeing a TV programme about childbirth or hospitals). Some people also re-experience smells and sounds relating to the birth.

2. Avoiding things to do with the birth

Examples of this include:

- Trying to avoid talking about the birth
- Trying to avoid thinking about, or remembering, the birth
- Not being able to recall some important aspect of the birth (although this may be normal due to side effects of pain relief medication)
- Avoiding places, things, or people connected with the birth (e.g. not wanting to return to the hospital for appointments)

3. Unusual emotions and feelings

You may experience feelings that are very different to ones you had before.

Examples of this include:

- Losing interest in activities that you used to enjoy
- Feeling detached from others
- Feeling pessimistic about the future
- Struggling to bond with your baby
- Being over-alert to possible dangers, e.g. carrying out unnecessary safety checks, or being 'wary' of others
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feelings of guilt and self blame

4. Feeling more tense and irritable than usual

You may experience symptoms of increased anxiety and stress. These can affect people in different ways.

Some examples include:

- Physical symptoms of anxiety such as difficulty relaxing, difficulty breathing, palpitations, sweating and blushing, butterflies in your stomach; difficulty sleeping (even when your baby is sleeping)
- Poor concentration; forgetfulness; making mistakes, taking longer over things (some of these might be normal and be related to tiredness)
- Increased smoking or drinking more alcohol than prior to the pregnancy
- Being more irritable; having outbursts of anger; loss of self-confidence; tension; feeling something bad is going to happen; feeling depressed

Asking for help

Women often feel embarrassed or ashamed about admitting to having difficult feelings in the postnatal period as there is often an expectation from others that this is a time of joy and excitement. Or when you talk about your difficult feelings, you might find that people don't take you seriously and say things like "Don't worry, you're just tired." This type of response from others can make it even more difficult to admit that there is a problem. If you have some of the above symptoms of PTSD then it is important that you speak to someone about how you are feeling. You may also find it helpful to look at the self help leaflet on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at www.moodcafe.co.uk. This provides useful information about how to recognise if you have PTSD and some things you can do to help yourself including useful suggestions about dealing with flashbacks and nightmares, avoidance behaviour and anxiety.

As a starting point, try and tell those close to you how you are feeling. They may be able to listen and help you to think things through. It can be helpful to talk through the traumatic birth experience or write about it. Try to find out as much as you can about what happened and fill in any gaps in your memory. This will allow you to piece together a clearer understanding of the birth, which should help you in your recovery. If, however, you continue to experience symptoms of PTSD then it is important to tell your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor. They will be able to offer you support and advice. They may also discuss the possibility of referring you to a therapist for 'talking treatment' which is the recommended treatment for PTSD.

‘Baby Blues’ & Postnatal Depression

It is not uncommon for people who experience PTSD to also have difficulties with low mood. It is thought that as many as 80% of new mothers will experience feelings of weepiness in the few days after the birth. This heightened emotional state is caused by hormonal changes and also because once the initial ‘high’ of giving birth dies down, natural fears often start to creep in. This is called ‘the baby blues’ and usually disappears after a few days. However, if the feelings of low mood and tearfulness persist for several weeks or months after the birth then you may have postnatal depression. There is a separate leaflet about post natal depression at www.moodcafe.co.uk.

Deciding whether to have more children

If you have had a previous traumatic birth, you may feel understandably anxious about having another child. It is important that you discuss these anxieties with your Midwife as they will be able to offer you advice and support. You may find it helpful to learn ways of managing your anxiety during your pregnancy such as relaxation exercises (see the self help leaflet on “Relaxation” at www.moodcafe.co.uk) or antenatal yoga. There is also growing evidence for the use of approaches such as hypnosis (which uses language, visualisation and relaxation) to help women manage the process of labour and birth. Ask your Midwife for more information about Hypnobirthing.

Further help

Useful Self Help Books:

The following books should be available in all Fife libraries or can be purchased from most good book stores. A number of the books below are part of the Fife book prescription scheme. This means that your GP or midwife can ‘prescribe’ you a self help book which you can then get from your local library. Further details about the book prescription scheme are available at www.moodcafe.co.uk.

Herbert, C. & Wetmore, A. (1999). Overcoming Traumatic Stress. Constable & Robinson.
ISBN: 1841190160
Available as a book prescription

Curham, S. (2000). Antenatal and postnatal depression. Practical advice and support for all sufferers. Vermilion.
ISBN: 9780091856075
Available as a book prescription

Williams, C., Cantwell, R. & Robertson, K. (2009). Overcoming postnatal depression. A five areas approach. Hodder Arnold.
ISBN: 978-0-340-97234-2
Available as a book prescription

Aitken, C. (2000). Surviving post-natal depression: At home, no one hears you scream. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
ISBN: 978 1 85302 861 8
Available as a book prescription

Nicolson, P. (2001) Postnatal depression: Facing the paradox of loss, happiness and motherhood. Wiley.
ISBN: 0-471-48527-6