



Psychological birth trauma

A guide for women and their families

The birth of a baby is usually an exciting and positive experience for parents but sometimes it may be experienced as 'traumatic'. The trauma may be physical (when injuries such as tears or muscle damage occur) or psychological (when it is stressful, frightening or distressing). The feelings of distress usually lessen with time but sometimes additional help is needed to restore your mental health.

How common is psychological birth trauma?

We don't really know how many parents experience psychological birth trauma but we do know that physical birth injuries are common and can affect mental health.

What causes psychological birth trauma?

Parents may experience psychological birth trauma when things did not go the way they planned or the birth experience may be affected by events in your past. You are more likely to experience psychological birth trauma if:

- you have previously had traumatic experiences such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, rape and migrant trauma
- you have a mental health condition or have had one in the past
- you have previously had a physically traumatic birth and experienced a lot of pain in the time after the birth
- you have a fear of birth or had a pregnancy where additional monitoring was needed
- the birth did not go as you planned (for example you had an emergency caesarean section or instrumental birth)
- your baby is born too early or with health problems, or does not survive after birth.

What are the signs and symptoms of psychological birth trauma?

It is not unusual for it to take time to recover from psychological birth trauma and you may experience symptoms of distress for a few months. Common signs and symptoms of psychological birth trauma include:

- feeling dazed, agitated, overactive and/or withdrawn, disorientated, emotionally numb
- anxiety symptoms - increased heart rate, palpitations, sweating, jelly legs, "butterflies in stomach" and dry mouth

- depression and/or anxiety
- some blocked memories, or flashbacks from the birth
- feeling extremely alert or watchful
- nightmares
- trouble bonding with your baby
- fear of sexual intimacy.

When you are still experiencing these symptoms 3 months after the birth, it is time to seek help.

How is psychological birth trauma treated?

Talking therapies

Talking therapies can be very helpful in treating mental health symptoms. They can help you recognise and change the negative thinking and feelings that depression brings. They also give you useful tools to stop your symptoms coming back.

Talking therapies that are helpful in treating psychological birth trauma include:

- trauma-focused cognitive behaviour therapy, which is designed to help people overcome the negative effects of a traumatic experience, whether the trauma was a single or multiple experience
- eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing, which involves being guided to move your eyes in a specific way while you process traumatic memories.

These are treatments that are offered over a number of sessions. Treatments offered over a single session that focus on 're-living' the trauma are unlikely to be helpful and could cause further distress.

Peer support can also be helpful (see the information provided on contacting PANDA).

Medicines

Depending on your symptoms, you may be offered antidepressants. A combination of talking therapies and medicine is better than either alone.



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Advice for women experiencing psychological birth trauma

Seek help and treatment

- Seek help from a doctor or **other** health professional.
- Learn about effective treatments.
- Call a support service or mental health crisis line if other help is not available.

Accept help and support

- Develop a support system of friends, family and professionals and accept help.
- Discuss your feelings with your partner, family and friends.

Look after your physical health

- Try to eat healthy meals, including fruit, vegetables, whole grains and lots of water.
- Plan some enjoyable physical activity every day.
- Try to establish good sleeping patterns.
- Practice techniques to reduce stress, such as muscle relaxation and deep breathing.

Advice for family and friends providing support

Listen and reassure

- Encourage the woman to discuss her symptoms.
- Explain that mental health symptoms can be treated and managed.

Provide information

- Give the woman good quality information about psychological birth trauma, such as this fact sheet.
- Give details of helplines if she is feeling distressed and needs support.
- Offer information to the woman's partner/others.

Direct to care and support

- Encourage the woman to talk to her GP or other health professional.
- Encourage the woman to identify and draw on possible supports and services that may be available to her for practical and/or emotional support.
- Remind the woman that she can go to her doctor or local hospital if she is at risk of harming herself or others.

Information for women and their families:

Ready to COPE Guide:

Sign up to receive free weekly information about emotional and mental health throughout your pregnancy and first year with a new baby, at [readytcope.org.au](https://www.readytcope.org.au)

To talk to someone:

To speak with a specialist counsellor, call the [PANDA helpline](https://www.panda.org.au) on 1300 726 306 (Monday to Saturday 9.00am – 7.30pm AEST/AEDT)

To find a service:

To find out about other perinatal mental health treatment and support services, visit the [eCOPE Directory](https://www.eCOPE.org.au)

Where you can get more information:

More information about psychological birth trauma can be found at [cope.org.au](https://www.cope.org.au)



COPE
Centre of Perinatal Excellence

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