



Psychological Trauma from Birthing Experiences

This handout contains information pertaining to psychological trauma from birthing experiences, which may occur to some women.

What is Psychological Trauma from Birthing Experiences?

Psychological trauma from birthing experiences refers to the distress that a woman experiences due to circumstances surrounding the birthing process, ranging from the childbirth itself to the immediate post-childbirth period. Psychological trauma from birthing experiences is not just about what *physically* happened during the labour or the childbirth process; it is more about your *emotional and psychological experience* of the event.

If it seemed that you and/or your baby were at risk of losing your lives, and you are experiencing significant distress symptoms from this, you may have developed psychological trauma. Affected women may report varying intensities of traumatic stress symptoms, with some meeting the full diagnostic criteria for childbirth-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), also called postnatal PTSD.





What are some risk factors that may contribute to psychological trauma?

There are three main types of risk factors, as listed below:

Medical events and/or medical complications:

- High levels of medical intervention, such as an induced labour, assisted delivery (i.e. forceps), or emergency C-section
- Severe physical complication or injury related to the birth (e.g. postpartum haemorrhage, perineal tears, etc.)
- Babies born with high needs and requiring immediate intensive care
- A stillbirth or death of the baby soon after the delivery
- Babies developing a disability because of physical trauma during the birth

Subjective negative experiences of childbirth:

- Lack of information or explanations provided by the professionals about the birth process and options available
- Feeling that you are not listened to or supported by the professionals around you
- Lack of privacy
- Fear of the birth process
- Needing to adapt to unexpected changes in procedures during labour





Mental health and trauma histories:

- Physical and/or psychological birth trauma from previous births
- Previous traumatic experiences, especially sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse
- History of perinatal anxiety
- History of PTSD

What are some traumatic stress symptoms that may arise?

The symptoms of psychological trauma from birthing experiences are related to the circumstances surrounding the childbirth. The four symptom categories are:

- **Intrusion symptoms** associated with the birth: these can occur through intrusive (or difficult to control) thoughts, memories, nightmares, or flashbacks.
- **Avoidance** of any reminders of the birth: you may avoid internal (e.g. thoughts, feelings, memories) and/or external (e.g. places, situations, people, objects) reminders of the birth.
- **Increased arousal and reactivity**: You may constantly worry that something bad is going to happen to your baby, and you may always feel on edge and irritable.
- **Negative changes** in thoughts and mood related to the birth: you may feel guilty for what happened, and you may have difficulties expressing positive emotions.

For more details about general psychological trauma symptoms, please refer to the brochure *Psychological Trauma in Adults*.





What are some benefits of seeking professional support?

Some may believe that having a new baby can make up for the traumatic childbirth experience. However, this may not be the case for some affected women who may feel anxious about having a baby or become more vigilant about their baby's health, to the point where their relationships with their family members, or their ability to carry out daily tasks may be impacted.

Research suggests that seeking professional support for psychological trauma from birth experiences can have a positive effect on your mental health, your breastfeeding experience, your baby's physical development (e.g. eating, sleeping), and your attachment bond with your baby.

When and where can you seek professional support from?

If you find yourself identifying with some of the symptoms related to psychological trauma from birth experiences, it is important to receive appropriate support. If these symptoms are overwhelming your ability to cope or take care of your child, and/or if these symptoms have been present for more than **one month**, please reach out for professional support.

There are evidence-based psychological treatments available to help reduce the intensity and impact of traumatic memories and stress symptoms in affected women. Seeking early treatment can help you recover from psychological trauma, return to enjoying the things and relationships that are important to you, and improve your overall well-being.





Consider speaking with your polyclinic doctor or general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a psychiatrist and/or psychologist in restructured hospitals. You may also wish to consider seeking out private psychiatrists or psychologists, without needing a referral.

If you are currently seeing a psychiatrist or medical doctor at KKH, they can refer you to the **KKH Psychosocial Trauma Support Service (PTSS)**. PTSS consists of a team of clinical psychologists who specialises in providing psychological trauma assessment and interventions for women and children. These forms of support can help you to better cope with the after-effects of traumatic experiences.

