

Birth Trauma

Support and Resource Guide



Birth Trauma Support & Resource Guide

by Wildflower Center for Emotional Health

We created this guide to offer support, practical tools, and trusted resources for new parents navigating the emotional aftermath of a difficult or traumatic birth.

You are not alone. Our perinatal mental health specialists at Wildflower are here to provide the attuned care and guidance you deserve.

Understanding Birth Trauma

Birth trauma refers to the emotional distress and psychological impact that can follow a difficult or overwhelming childbirth. It's possible to experience birth trauma even if the baby is healthy or others consider the birth "successful" or medically uncomplicated—it's about how the birthing parent felt during and after the event.

Birth trauma occurs when the birthing parent felt intensely afraid, out of control, voiceless, and helpless during childbirth. Trauma is a subjective experience; what matters most is how it felt to you, not how it looked to others.

Birth trauma can occur for many reasons. It may stem from unexpected medical complications, emergency interventions, feeling unheard or dismissed by healthcare providers, or experiencing intense pain or loss of control. Sometimes, even when things appear to go "according to plan," a parent can still walk away feeling shaken or distressed.

Studies suggest that up to **one in three births** are experienced as traumatic by the birthing parent (Dekel et al., 2017).

It's important to know that birth trauma is a real and valid response to an overwhelming event. Parents may experience lingering feelings of fear, sadness, anxiety, or even guilt when thinking about their birth. They might also find that memories of the birth are hard to talk about or come back in distressing ways.

If you've experienced birth trauma, you are not alone. Support is available. Talking about your experience, reaching out for emotional support, and connecting with professionals who understand birth trauma can help you heal and feel more grounded in your new role as a parent.

You can feel happy that your baby is here, and very distressed about the circumstances of your baby's arrival at the same time.

What Increases the Risks of Experiencing Birth Trauma?

You are more likely to experience birth trauma if during childbirth:

- ❖ You felt unheard, ignored or dismissed
- ❖ You experienced unexpected medical interventions
- ❖ You felt like you had no control
- ❖ You endured intense pain or fear
- ❖ You feared for your life or your baby's life
- ❖ You lacked emotional support

Additional factors that may increase your risk include:

- ❖ A history of trauma or PTSD
- ❖ Unresolved mental health conditions prior to the perinatal period
- ❖ Being a person of color, a military service member, or a military spouse
- ❖ Experiencing poverty

Common Responses to Birth Trauma

Birth trauma can lead to a range of emotional and mental health difficulties:

Anxiety or panic – Feeling on edge, worrying about your baby's safety, or experiencing panic attacks.

Depression – Ongoing sadness, loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, or feeling disconnected from your baby or partner.

Posttraumatic stress (PTSD) – Flashbacks, nightmares, or intense distress when reminded of the birth.

Hypervigilance – Feeling constantly on alert, jumpy, or overly protective.

Avoidance – Steering clear of conversations, medical settings, or even thoughts about the birth.

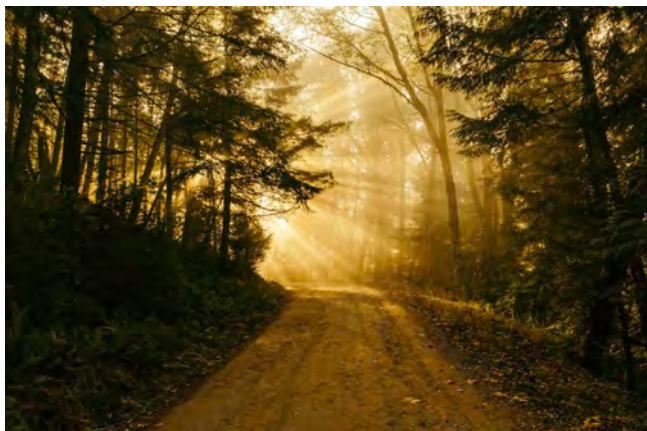
Feelings of guilt or shame – Blaming yourself for how the birth went, or believing you "should" feel differently.

Difficulty bonding with your baby – Struggling to feel connected or enjoy time together because of unresolved trauma.

You Deserve to Heal

Not seeking help for birth trauma can have lasting effects on both your emotional health and your family life. Unresolved trauma can lead to mental health challenges, and it can make bonding with your baby or feeling close to your partner more difficult. Over time, these struggles can leave you feeling isolated, disconnected, or weighed down by guilt or shame.

The good news is that help is available and healing is possible. With the right support, you can process what happened, address your symptoms, and regain a sense of safety and trust in yourself and others.



How Psychotherapy Can Help

Therapy provides a safe space to confront the intense emotions that can follow a difficult birth. Evidence-based approaches like trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Processing Therapy, or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing can reduce flashbacks, anxiety, and intrusive thoughts, while teaching coping skills to manage triggers.

Therapy can also strengthen relationships, helping you communicate your needs, feel closer to your partner, and bond with your baby.

It's important to find a mental health professional who is knowledgeable in birth trauma. Wildflower therapists are trained specialists in pregnancy and postpartum mental health, and many hold the esteemed Perinatal Mental Health Certification through Postpartum Support International. Reach out to us to learn more about Wildflower's services.

Questions to Consider Asking a Prospective Therapist

- ❖ Do you have experience working with clients who have experienced traumatic childbirth?
- ❖ Are you trained in any trauma-focused therapies, such as EMDR or Cognitive Processing Therapy?
- ❖ How familiar are you with postpartum mental health conditions, including postpartum depression, anxiety, and PTSD?
- ❖ Do you incorporate partners or family members in the process, if desired?

Resources

Books

Birth Trauma: A Guide for You, Your Friends and Family to Coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Following Birth

by Kim Thomas

A leading book that explains everything you, your family and friends need to know about birth trauma: what causes it, how it affects your relationships, and how to treat it.

How to Heal a Bad Birth: Making sense, Making peace and Moving On

by Melissa Bruijn and Debby Gould

A straightforward guide for women who have experienced a difficult, disappointing or traumatic birth.

Why Birth Trauma Matters

by Emma Svanberg

Clinical psychologist and co-founder of Make Birth Better Emma Svanberg explores what happens to those who go through a traumatic birth and how to heal.

Birth Shock: How to Recover From Birth Trauma

by Mia Scotland

Perinatal clinical psychologist Mia Scotland explains clearly what can be harmful about birth, how birth trauma can affect mothers, fathers and health professionals, why it seems to be on the rise, and how to recover.

Heal Your Birth Story: Releasing the Unexpected

by Maureen Campion

The author shares her personal experience with birth trauma and the work she has been doing with mothers through workshops and counseling to address unexpected birth outcomes.



Articles and Guides

Make Birth Better: Free Resources for Parents

These free downloadable resources address common topics that include therapies and treatments; how to know if you are traumatized; caring for your relationship as a couple; trauma-informed birth, and others.

Birth Trauma Stories

Curated by the non-profit organization Birth Trauma Association, these stories serve to help those who have experienced birth trauma feel less alone.

Making Peace with Your Birth Experience

An educational article by Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., IBCLC on difficult birth experiences and pragmatic steps to help women come to terms with them.

How to Write Your Birth Story: A Path to Healing

A pragmatic guide from March of Dimes on how to process a difficult birth experience and why it's important to do so.

Podcasts

The Birth Trauma Mama Podcast

Kayleigh is a licensed therapist and birth trauma survivor whose podcast aims to shed light on women's experiences of traumatic childbirth and offer pathways to healing.

Healing After Birth Trauma and Postpartum Preeclampsia, Mom and Mind podcast episode 436

A podcast episode featuring a survivor's story of preeclampsia and birth trauma, and her experience of healing through psychotherapy.

Healing from birth Trauma with Dr Rebecca Moore, Happy Mum, Happy Baby podcast episode

A podcast episode featuring an interview with a reproductive psychiatrist focusing on the nature and impact of birth trauma, its emotional effects, the potential for PTSD, long-term consequences, and self-advocacy strategies.

Helplines

National Maternal Mental Health Hotline

1-833-852-6262 - (available 24/7)

Staffed by trained counselors, this hotline can be called or texted for support at any time.

PSI Helpline

1-800-944-4773 (4PPD) - (8 am-11 pm EST)

Provides resources, information, support- not to be utilized for emergencies.

Websites and Organizations

Postpartum Support International (PSI)

A leading U.S.-based non-profit that works to raise awareness, prevent, and treat perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMADs) through accessible peer support, educational resources, professional training, and advocacy efforts.

Birth Trauma Association

A UK-based charity dedicated to offering peer support, campaigning, and engagement in research and policy to aid women and families affected by birth trauma.

Make Birth Better

Another UK-based non-profit collective that empowers parents and professionals through training, free resources, and awareness campaigns—advocating for trauma-informed, equitable maternity care to eliminate birth trauma.

Support Groups

Postpartum Support International Birth Trauma Support Group (online)

Led by trained peer facilitators, this group is for any birthing person who has experienced trauma (mental and/or physical) during childbirth.

Birth Trauma Support Group (Facebook)

A Facebook-based group recommended by Preeclampsia Foundation.

Maternal Near-Miss Survivors Support Group (Facebook)

This group is a safe place where survivors find comfort and offer support as they journey toward healing together.

Traumatic Birth Stories and Support (Facebook)

A supportive space for survivors of childbirth trauma.

NICU Support Groups

Hand to Hold is a nonprofit dedicated to providing early-intervention mental health support, educational resources and community before, during and after a NICU stay. The support groups are free and offered in English and Spanish.

Helpful Tips from a Therapist's Toolbox

Affirm your experience and stop judging yourself

Remember that trauma is a subjective experience. If you are distressed by how childbirth unfolded, your feelings are valid. Thinking that you shouldn't feel the way you do or that it wasn't "that bad," doesn't change the reality of what you actually experienced. Acknowledging the distressing nature of your experience is the first key step toward recovery.

Speak with trusted others

Emotional pain grows in secrecy. It's important to reach out and share your experience with people you trust.

Learn more about birth trauma

Educating yourself about birth trauma can help validate your experience and reduce feelings of loneliness. Check out the resources shared in this guide as a helpful starting point.

Practice grounding techniques

Trauma lives in the body. Grounding techniques can support you in reconnecting with the present moment and calming your body's stress response. Simple practices like deep breathing, noticing the sensations of your feet on the floor, or gently stretching can help you feel more stable, safe, and in control.

Remember: Your wellbeing is a priority

Taking care of yourself is not selfish. It's essential for both you and your baby. Don't ignore your needs. If you're struggling, reach out for support. Motherhood was never meant to be a solo journey.

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If you are looking to start psychotherapy at Wildflower, please reach out to our intake team by calling 312.809.0298 or completing the inquiry form on our website.

