

Following birth and mental well-being – you matter too!

So you've had your baby. Maybe you had a picture in your mind of what the birth would be like. Maybe you read every book and went to every class so thought you were really prepared emotionally. Maybe you had exactly the kind of birth you hoped for. Or perhaps you didn't get your Birth Plan 'A' – ending up with your Plan 'B', 'C' – or none of them at all.

Perhaps you feel OK about changes to the way your birth unfolded because you had spent time working on communication with your partner, on preparing for what emotional support you needed, on researching your options and choices. Perhaps you feel like you were in the centre of decision making with an incredible team of encouraging, respectful and kind people around you. Or maybe not. What do you do if you are feeling overwhelmed by negative emotions following the birth of your baby?



It is known that mental well-being can be affected by the way you were treated during birth. All of the following can be red flags, indicating the potential development of birth-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: if you did not feel respected, supported and encouraged; if you were not given options, choices and explanations; if you were not asked for your consent or treated with kindness and dignity; if you had poor pain relief; if you had a frightening fast birth or a very long birth; if the birth was a medical emergency and you were afraid that you or your baby were in danger; or if you struggled with breastfeeding.

PTSD, or 'Birth Trauma', can result in nightmares, flashbacks, fears, phobias, intrusive negative or scary thoughts, loss of confidence, difficulty bonding with your baby, feelings of sadness and anger, avoidance of all things birth related and reminders of what happened – or perhaps a need to talk about it a lot.

Symptoms can overlap with Postnatal Depression, which is much more commonly heard of. Symptoms of PND can be a sense of hopelessness and despair, difficulty bonding with your baby, feeling inadequate as a mother, sadness, anger or guilt, difficulty finding enjoyment in life and doing the things you used to enjoy, difficulty sleeping or eating, thoughts of harming yourself or your baby, etc.

The difference is that PTSD develops because of something that happened to you – the way you were supported and how you felt about it (which is unique to you). PND can develop even if you had a relatively good birth.

There are other mental health conditions too, such as Anxiety and Postnatal Psychosis, which is a medical emergency where sufferers develop a sense of unreality and hallucinations, and therefore experience huge highs or lows.

Estimates believe that one in five parents suffer with mental ill health around the time of having a baby. Having read all of those detailed descriptions, the good news is that *all* of these conditions are treatable with the right kind of support, therapy or medication and parents *do* make full recoveries!



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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Care for the Family – A Christian response to a world of need.
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Mothers with very severe depression or Postnatal Psychosis are sometimes treated in a Mother and Baby Unit, so that the mum and baby can stay together and staff can assist them to bond and heal. Such specialist units are not available everywhere in the UK, but many areas do now have a specialist Perinatal Mental Health Team, which means that parents can be supported in their own homes.

Dads and partners can experience PTSD and PND after the birth of their baby too, especially if the birth was very traumatic and they felt out of control and anxious that their partner or baby was in danger.

The first line of defence for all support is found through your midwives. They can explain what happened during the birth and reassure you. The community midwives who come to see you at home will also listen to you. Your health visitor can offer support and information, and your GP can offer you medication or counselling.

If there is a very serious mental health condition it will become noticeable very soon after the birth. For others it may take longer for them to be picked up. Many women have a six-week check after their baby is born. It's important to go to this and to share how you are feeling if you feel low. This may be facilitated through a mental health questionnaire provided by your health visitor. Please be honest, as they will not judge you; they want to support you.

Seeking help early is key, but be persistent if you are not taken seriously the first time you ask for help. It can be useful to take your partner, friend or family member with you for support. You may be given the chance to access a 'de-brief' in a Birth Afterthoughts Clinic, where you can go over your birth notes with a senior midwife.

'Self-care' is probably the most important tool you have to support your own mental well-being after birth. Self-care means recognising that you are in a period of 'recovery' after the birth. It involves organising your family life around supporting yourself during this period, which may last a few weeks, months or even a couple of years for those seriously affected.

Be kind to yourself, eat well and try to sleep as much as you can. Limit visitors in the early days post-birth, and be confident about saying 'no'. Try to get some daylight and fresh air each day. Keep in touch with friends and family to lower the chance of feeling isolated. Plan some alone time when your partner can look after the baby without you. Try to maintain an interest that reminds you of your old self. Try to laugh! Remember that you are on the same team as your partner, allies not enemies!

It can be really helpful to seek out support organisations such as breastfeeding groups, the PANDAS Foundation, the Birth Trauma Association or other online support groups.

If you attend a parent and toddler group, be brave and tell the leaders that you are struggling, so that they can ask you about your week and take an interest in your recovery. And cling on to hope, because you *will* feel better again! Remember: it is about so much more than simply having a healthy baby ... you matter too!



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