

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

Welcoming a baby into your life is usually thought of as a happy and exciting event. But for some of us, the experience of giving birth and becoming a parent can be frightening, disorienting, and even traumatising. There are few official figures for how many women suffer from postnatal PTSD, and because of the continued lack of recognition of the condition, it is difficult to say how common it really is. Some studies that have attempted to quantify the problem estimate that 4% of births lead to PTSD. One study from 2003 found that around a third of mothers who experience a "traumatic delivery", defined as involving complications, the use of instruments to assist delivery or near death, go on to develop PTSD.

With 130 million babies born around the world every year, that means that a staggering number of women may be trying to cope with the disorder with little or no recognition. And postnatal PTSD might not only be a problem for mothers. Some research has found evidence that partners can suffer it too after witnessing their partner go through a traumatic birth.

Despite these potentially debilitating effects, postnatal PTSD was only formally recognised in the 1990s when the American Psychiatry Association changed its description of what constitutes a traumatic event. The association originally considered PTSD to be "something outside the range of usual human experience", but then changed the definition to include an event where a person "witnessed or confronted serious physical threat or injury to themselves or others and in which the person responded with feelings of fear, helplessness or horror".

Pregnancy, birth, and the postnatal period are all intense, transformative times of life. They are also marked by significant physical, hormonal, and emotional changes. Most of us have heard of postnatal depression (PND), but what you may not know is that PND isn't the only possible mood disorder experienced by new parents after having a baby. Although postpartum PTSD is still being studied and understood.

Causes and symptoms of postnatal PTSD

Everyone experiences PTSD differently, but it is usually characterised by feelings of hypervigilance, fear, and intrusive thoughts.

Your feelings of panic may be elicited by thinking about something frightening that happened during your labour and/or birth, such as being rushed to the operating room for a C-section. Your emotions may be easily triggered when someone mentions something related to your birth or anything traumatic that happened to you during birth or the postnatal period.

Traumatic events that may cause postnatal PTSD include:

- difficult labour with a long and painful delivery
- an unplanned caesarean section
- emergency treatment
- other shocking, unexpected and traumatic experiences during birth



Some people feel that having a new baby makes up for any traumatic experiences. Or they may think that enjoying being a new parent means they will soon forget about trauma. But these traumatic experiences may have a negative effect on your relationship with your partner, baby and the people around you.

You may feel disappointed that your birth was not the experience you were hoping for. Or you might feel angry with the medical staff if you felt that the delivery wasn't handled well.

Your experiences may also make you feel anxious about having another baby in future, in case you have to go through a similar experience during birth.

Symptoms of PTSD include:

- Avoidance of any reminders of the traumatising events
- Avoidance of people or institutions associated with the traumatising event, such as doctors or hospitals
- Sleep disturbances and frequent nightmares
- Flashbacks to the traumatic event
- Intrusive thoughts/images related to the trauma
- Being easily startled
- A general feeling that you or your baby are in danger
- Frequent panic attacks
- Feeling easily irritated or aggravated
- Feeling detached from others
- Wanting to withdraw from relationships
- Blaming yourself for the traumatic event

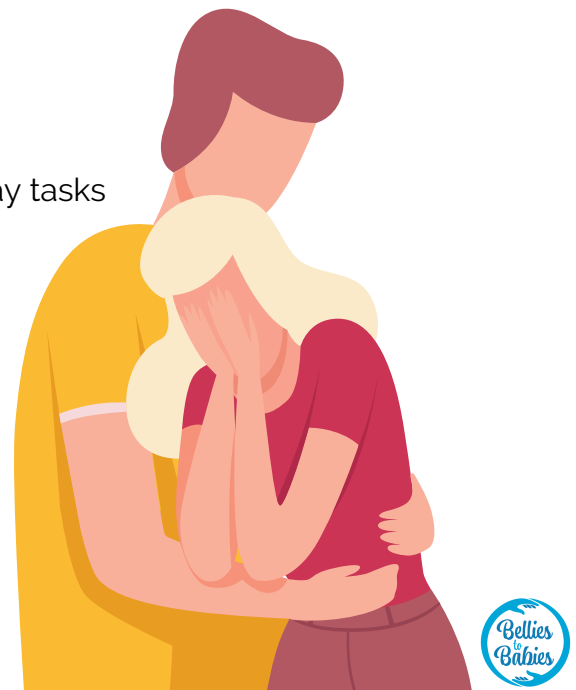
This may include:

- vivid flashbacks (feeling that the trauma is happening right now)
- intrusive thoughts and images
- nightmares
- intense distress at real or symbolic reminders of the trauma
- physical sensations such as pain, sweating, nausea or trembling.

Alertness or feeling on edge

This may include:

- panicking when reminded of the trauma
- being easily upset or angry
- extreme alertness, known as 'hypervigilance'
- finding it hard to sleep, even when you have the chance
- irritability or aggressive behaviour
- finding it hard to concentrate, including on simple or everyday tasks
- being jumpy or easily startled
- self-destructive or reckless behaviour
- other symptoms of anxiety



Avoiding feelings or memories

This may include:

- feeling like you have to keep busy
- avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma
- being unable to remember details of what happened
- feeling emotionally numb or cut off from your feelings
- feeling physically numb or detached from your body
- being unable to express affection
- using alcohol or recreational drugs to avoid memories

Sometimes having a traumatic birth isn't what causes PTSD. Other risk factors may include:

- a history of infertility, and needing assistance getting pregnant
- having had a history of childbirth complications
- a history of abortion
- social isolation
- previous mental health challenges, including PTSD and depression

Treatment for Postnatal PTSD

Thankfully, there are several treatment options for people who are struggling with PTSD. Many of them overlap with common treatment options for people who have general PTSD, not associated with having had a baby.

Most treatment options that are known to be effective in treating postpartum PTSD focus on Trauma-Focused Psychological Therapies (TFPT). These therapies have shown to be effective within the first 3 months postpartum, as well as in the first 3-6 months postpartum.

The most widely recommended therapies for managing PTSD include:

- Exposure therapy, which involves carefully, but purposefully exposing you to the thing that you are afraid of
- Cognitive behavioural therapy, a type of therapy that involves identifying and changing your negative thought patterns
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), a therapy designed to explore your past traumas and use eye movement techniques to reduce the intensity of the triggers and memories

Medication

Often, the treatment for PTSD involves both therapy and medication. You can talk to your doctor or health care professional to determine if medication is right for you. Most of the medications used to treat depression, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) can also successfully treat postnatal PTSD.

Experiencing PTSD can deeply affect your emotional, mental and physical well-being, as well as your ability to care for and bond with your baby. Postnatal PTSD is common, and an understandable reaction to difficult circumstances and you didn't do anything wrong.

Please know that help is out there. Treatment for PTSD is effective and can help you feel more balanced, strong, and able to be the parent you want to be.

For a list of providers, please see below.



Depression Helpline

If you need someone to talk to about the way you are feeling, the Depression Helpline is available 24/7. Phone: 0800 111 757
TXT: 4202

Bellyful

Providing meals for mums with newborn babies or struggling with illness eg. postnatal depression
Ph 0508 BELLYFUL
www.bellyful.org.nz

Mothers Helpers

Our mission is to prevent Perinatal (Antenatal and Postnatal) Depression or Anxiety from occurring and reduce the impact it has on your life, your family's life and your child's life. We can do this by providing you with support and recovery.
www.mothershelpers.co.nz

Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Aotearoa (PADA)

PADA is a national charity that provides advocacy and awareness through training and facilitating connections and tools for health care providers who are supporting families with anxiety & depression due to pregnancy, childbirth and early parenting
<https://pada.nz/>

Small Steps

Health & wellbeing toolbox developed to help with feelings of anxiety, stress, or low mood. Each tool only takes a few minutes.
smallsteps.org.nz

Littleshadow

Low-cost counselling, resources, group therapy
littleshadow.org.nz

Kids Need Dads

Auckland, Wellington Christchurch based support for Fathers
kidzneeddadz.org.nz

Dad's HQ

Here to listen to support you and your family.
We bring our understanding to support you in your parenting and relationship challenges.
If you are parenting alone or co-parenting we hope we can offer you some support to continue to raise happy healthy kids!
www.dadshq.co.nz

Kite for Mums

Designed to be a supportive journey for mums of all stages, it aims to give mothers the tools to cope with all aspects of motherhood. Like HR support in their pocket, it acts as a professional development tool combined with a well-being resource.
www.thekiteprogram.com/kite-individual/kite-for-mums