



IMPROVING BIRTH
Safer birth for all

Pathways to Healing

A GUIDE TO EMOTIONAL HEALING AFTER A DIFFICULT CHILDBIRTH

We believe that a healthy mom and baby includes a happy mom and baby.

These tools are part of Improving Birth's campaign to Break the Silence around trauma and abuse in maternity care. They are one piece of several – including the #breakthesilence photo project, the article "Trauma, Traumatic Birth, and Recovery," the resource "How to File a Complaint for Mistreatment in Childbirth," stories from women, and more – intended to open up the conversation on these issues. We offer you these tools and resource directory with the goal of helping you find hope, healing, and health.

Loving support and respectful care can make all the difference!

If you had a difficult, or perhaps traumatic birth, it is vital for your own health and that of your family that you take the opportunity to seriously look at how you perceive your birth experience and to thoroughly address any areas that need attention.

**TAKE THIS SHORT SURVEY TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR BELIEFS
ABOUT YOUR BIRTH AND HOW THEY HAVE IMPACTED YOUR LIFE.**

Birth trauma has a ripple effect beyond the mother. Fathers or partners may also experience trauma from a difficult birth. Also, studies have shown that those who support women in birth (especially doulas and nurses) often experience secondary traumatic stress. This kind of trauma can forever affect the couple's relationship and the family unit. Furthermore, studies in epigenetics are revealing how women can transfer trauma to their babies in utero.

It is important to remember that every person's reaction to trauma is as unique as their journey towards healing.

There is no right way to proceed, as every person finds their own path. Sometimes it can take months or years to process and integrate the memories and feeling associated with the trauma. It's important to find a qualified professional or support group who can assist you in the process of healing, and even more important that you be patient and loving with yourself. Allow yourself time for adjustments as you heal in your own way. As explained by Solace for Mothers, many women with birth trauma do not have all nine symptoms required for the diagnosis of PTSD, but they do suffer from debilitating traumatic stress. No matter where you are on the spectrum, you still deserve health, balance, and a fulfilling experience of mothering.

For more information on the differences between trauma symptoms, PTSD, and more, [click here.](#)



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PREPARATION DURING PREGNANCY

Although it can be hard to speak with your care provider about your history of trauma, it is very important they are aware of it. If you find it hard to bring up the topic, or are unable to find the words, you may want to consider creating a short letter to give to your providers with as much or as little information as you'd like them to know.

Medical Examinations

It is not unusual for a survivor of trauma to have difficulty with medical examinations. You may find some helpful tips here that can also be shared with your care provider. Additionally, if you know that you will be having a surgical birth, you can plan for the Best Cesarean Possible.

It is important for women with a history of trauma to consider what specific triggers related to pregnancy and birth may cause some anxiety for them. Often, women underestimate or completely disregard the possibility that their trauma history may come up, and the multitude of ways that this can occur. Penny Simkin has created this wonderful resource you may consider using to help get you started in this process. ***When Survivors Give Birth***, the groundbreaking book she co-wrote with Phyllis Klaus, discusses the enormity of impact that trauma has on childbearing women, often in ways they may not have imagined prior to the birth. This book is written for childbearing women as well as care providers and birth professionals.

Making Choices

There are many choices to be made in pregnancy, labor, and birth, and preparation is essential to making an informed decision. In addition to the Right to Informed Consent, all people also have the Right to Informed Refusal.

If the situation is not an emergency and allows for time to decide, you may want to ask these questions (in the acronym BRAIN) to help gather the necessary information:

BENEFIT—what is the benefit or goal of the proposed test or procedure?

RISK—what are the risks of the proposed test or procedure?

ALTERNATIVES—are there less invasive alternatives we could try first? Benefits and risks of those?

INTUITION—listen to your gut and ask questions if you have concerns.

NOTHING—sometimes doing nothing is a valid and useful option. Birth takes time and patience.

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PREPARATION DURING PREGNANCY

Sometimes, people – and especially people who are uncomfortable around authority figures – report that pressure or coercion from care providers about a suggested procedure or course of treatment makes it difficult for them to find their voice. Here are some suggestions for these situations:

Suggestions for Responses to Pressure by Caregivers:

“Thank you. Could my partner and I have a minute or two to discuss our options?”

“I’d like to see that policy in writing.”

“I do not consent.”

“Please contact the patient advocate/liaison and have him/her join us for this conversation.”

“Please notify the legal department immediately that you intend to force me to have an intervention I have declined.”

Courtesy of Cristen Pascucci, Birth Monopoly

Although we’d like to believe that all care providers believe in a woman’s bodily autonomy and understand her rights to informed consent and informed refusal, it occasionally becomes a point of contention. It is important for women AND their providers to realize that:

- > **You have the right to full and accurate information** about the benefits, risks and alternatives of any medical test or procedure that is suggested or recommended.
- > **You have the right to refuse any medical test or procedure** that is suggested or recommended—without fear of hostility, threats, or retaliation by the care provider or staff
- > **Your insurance will still cover you if you sign out against medical advice** or refuse a test or procedure
- > **A woman has the same basic rights when she is pregnant** that she has when she is not pregnant, which are the *same as the rights of any U.S. citizen.*



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RECOGNIZING BIRTH TRAUMA

The vast majority of Americans have had exposure to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime. Although any woman can experience a traumatic birth, the likelihood goes up for those with a history of childhood sexual abuse, rape, or trauma. Childbirth is experienced as traumatic in up to 34% of all births, and about one-third of those women have symptoms of Postpartum Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). **PLEASE KNOW THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

Sometimes, a medical emergency or injury is the cause of the traumatic experience. Other times, what appears to be a "routine" birth resulting in a physically healthy mom and baby can result in a woman feeling traumatized during or after the event. In fact, of the women who contact Improving Birth about feeling traumatized, almost all report that the trigger for the trauma was how they were treated during birth (a lack of respect for their bodies and their decisions), rather than the medical circumstances of the birth.

"Birth trauma lies in the eye of the beholder"

explains Cheryl Tatano Beck, Professor of Nursing and an expert in the field of traumatic birth, noting that it is not unusual for the same birth to be considered routine by the care provider and traumatic by the mother. As one mother explained of her experience, "I looked fine because of the epidural, but I went to a very dark place in my mind, having flashbacks. I was freaking out inside, but nobody knew it. Now that I'm pregnant again, I'm terrified."

AN EVENT IS MORE LIKELY TO BE PERCEIVED AS TRAUMATIC WHEN:

- > It is unexpected
- > You felt unable to prevent it
- > You were intensely emotional because of it
- > You may be unable to stop thinking about the event
- > You are unable to remember the event.

Birth trauma is not just for mothers. As Band Back Together (BBT)—a helpful resource for birth trauma—explains, "Most information about birth trauma references the mother as the most common sufferer, although fathers and others attending the birth are now increasingly recognized as being affected by birth trauma. For some it may be a scary or dangerous aspect to the birth that causes birth trauma, while in other cases it might be other factors such as loss of control, lack of consent for medical procedures, or the attitudes or behaviors of the people around them."



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RECOGNIZING BIRTH TRAUMA

BBT goes on to explain the emotional, psychological, and physical symptoms of trauma as follows:

- > Shock
- > Anger
- > Denial or disbelief
- > Emotional numbness
- > Social isolation
- > Intrusive thoughts of the event
- > Flashbacks
- > Guilt
- > Shame
- > Sadness
- > Difficulties in concentration/memory problems
- > Anxiety, edginess, or hyper-vigilance
- > Racing heartbeat
- > Numbness, withdrawing from people
- > Insomnia or nightmares
- > Muscle aches and pains
- > Sexual difficulties
- > Fatigue
- > Muscle tension

At ImprovingBirth, our mission is to provide information, support and resources. We believe that every woman should make her own choices about her own needs. But when dealing with trauma, sometimes things may seem overwhelming, and it's hard to know where to start.

Your self-care is vital to the health of your entire family.

Self-care may not be a priority for you, so this may be an opportunity for you to recognize what areas of your life would benefit from immediate attention. Begin there. Sometimes it is hard to prioritize yourself, but it is an important step in your healing and in maintaining your health. The sooner you get appropriate help, the sooner you can enjoy healing.



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RECOVERING FROM TRAUMA

There are many ways that people can help themselves to heal from trauma, in their own time, and in their own way. Any family with a newborn understands the need for support, but in families impacted by trauma, support can be the difference between surviving and thriving.

Here are some ideas for new parents to consider while healing from trauma:

It Takes a Village—It is not a sign of weakness, but rather a show of courage when a person asks for help when needed. Consider asking friends or family to start a meal train so people can sign up to bring you some meals, taking the pressure off of meal planning.

Sleep Solutions—Consider asking a friend or family member to stay for a week or two to help you get sleep at night. You may also want to think about hiring a postpartum doula to assist in the transition with a new baby. Sleep is vital for physical as well as emotional healing.

The Almighty Pen—Many people find it cathartic to write about their experiences, either in a personal journal or to share with others. You may consider sending a letter to your provider, birth place, or insurance provider (depending on your issues/concerns) and letting them know about your experience and feelings about the birth. Some women request their medical records prior to doing this and comparing their recollections to the written record, occasionally filling in gaps in time or in communication. Sometimes this is cathartic, sometimes not, and sometimes it can be troubling. It is up to each woman to decide if this would be a valuable step in her healing process before requesting her records.

Be the Squeaky Wheel—If you feel that you need to go further than writing a letter, read *How to File A Complaint for Mistreatment in Childbirth* to learn

about the process and how to go about it, as well as where to send your complaint. When all else fails, a medical malpractice suit may be an option, although it is difficult to go forward unless there is documented evidence of permanent damage.

The Talking Cure—Talk to supportive friends and family about how you feel, try a support group for moms with traumatic births, and learn more about Postpartum Depression, Anxiety, and Psychosis.

Learn from an Expert—*Making Peace with your Birth Experience* contains valuable suggestions on processing your birth and moving forward.

Self-Help Strategies—In addition to practicing relaxation techniques, try some of these suggestions to help you de-stress, reduce anxiety, and promote healthy sleep.

Signals of Stress—Sometimes those with a history of trauma find they ignore their physical feelings and sensations, not realizing their responses are a reaction to stress. Recognizing the warning signs can help ward off an eventual blow-up.

One Day at a Time—There is no designated time frame for healing and it's common to experience setbacks as part of the normal process. Expect it, prepare for it, acknowledge it, and continue. We are all human. We all stumble and fall. You have the choice to either remain where you land, or get up and keep going.



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RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Because it can be overwhelming to go through all the information and decide where to start, we have partnered with United States-based support organizations to help you quickly and easily access resources and services that can be useful toward your healing.

Solace for Mothers

This amazing organization was designed for the sole purpose of providing and creating support for women who have experienced a traumatic childbirth. At Solace for Mothers, you will find a wealth of information, including a directory of mental health professionals specializing in trauma in the postpartum period and a guide to interviewing maternity care providers for a subsequent pregnancy after a traumatic birth. The organization also hosts online communities where mothers can give and receive emotional and informational support to one another as each member moves towards healing.

Postpartum Support International

Postpartum Support International (PSI) is dedicated to helping women suffering from perinatal mood and anxiety disorders, including postpartum depression—the most common complication of childbirth. Their site contains valuable information for women, families and professionals regarding support and resources for help, including how to find a counselor or support group in your area.

Holistic Peer Counseling for Birth and Parenting

With Holistic Peer Counseling (HPC), people heal from trauma at their own pace within a community of trained peer counselors skilled in a holistic approach. HPC combines the best of multiple worlds, marrying the engagement and solidarity of a peer support group with a one-on-one session model. It combines body awareness with basic counseling skills. All of this is threaded through modern technology to build an international network of peer counselors available for the entire community 24/7. Here is one small, but potent, quote from a woman recovering from her birth trauma using HPC: "I have taken back my power!" Statements such as these are not uncommon in the HPC community. HPC will donate 10% of registration fees that come through ImprovingBirth back to ImprovingBirth!



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RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONALS

ImprovingBirth Network has partnered with United States-based support organizations to help providers quickly and easily access resources and services that can be useful toward understanding birth trauma and aiding your clients and patients in their healing.

PATTCh - Prevention and Treatment of Traumatic Childbirth

Prevention and Treatment of Traumatic Childbirth (PATTCh) is a collective of birth and mental health experts dedicated to the prevention and treatment of traumatic childbirth, including Penny Simkin, a nationally known pioneer in the areas of both birth support and in trauma and childbirth. Professionals will find many helpful facts and resources at the PATTCh website.

Solace for Mothers

In addition to offering support and resources to mothers, Solace for Mothers facilitates an online community for birth professionals, mental health providers and loved ones to discuss how to best support mothers who are experiencing traumatic stress symptoms. Providers are also able to process their own secondary trauma that can come from witnessing or hearing about traumatic births.

Holistic Peer Counseling for Birth and Parenting

HPC recognizes that secondary trauma is a serious issue for our entire health care system. Care providers turn to HPC to recover from their trauma. Beyond supporting providers to recover from the trauma they experience in their work, many report that HPC has highly influenced the way they interface with their clients. They find they bring the skills they learn directly to their client-patient relationships. One trauma nurse reported that HPC is her current post-doctoral course of study. A CNM stated plainly, "HPC has made me a better healthcare provider."

For additional options, please see our Resource Directory.